

G R U M M A N F - 1 4
T M C T



B Y E - B Y E , B A B Y . . . !



IMAGES & REMINISCENCES FROM 35 YEARS OF ACTIVE SERVICE
COMPILED BY DAVE PARSONS ■ GEORGE HALL ■ BOB LAWSON

TOMCAT

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CHECK SIX



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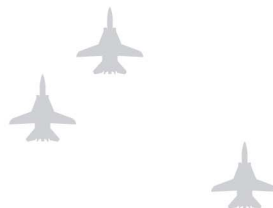
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NORTHROP GRUMMAN
DEFINING THE FUTURE





DEDICATION



For **TOM "STOUT" McGUINNESS**, Tomcatter extraordinaire and copilot of American Airlines Flight 11 on 11 September 2001.



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ANY TIME, BABY....!



EVEN NOW I CLOSE MY EYES AND HEAR THE CLICKETY-CLACK

of the shuttle as it moves aft for the next launch.

The exhaust from the powerful and reliable F-110 engines fills my nostrils until we drop the canopy and bring our jet to life. Air roars through the ECS. Systems power up. Soon we're parked behind the cat, waiting our turn. I roger the weight board – 68,000 pounds, Baby, 68,000 pounds! Grasp that if you can.

The jet blast deflector comes down and we taxi into place, my pilot deftly splitting the cat track with the twin nose tires. And then – even after decades of doing the same thing – the adrenaline starts to flow as we start into the deck ballet unique to the Tomcat. The nose strut compresses, giving the fighter the look of a rail dragster. The launch bar drops down. Wings motor forward. Flaps lower. Outboard spoiler module circuit breaker is engaged – an old RIO gotcha. Our four hands go up as the ordies arm the missiles, bombs and gun.

The cat officer's arm is raised. My pilot puts the throttles to mil power and wipes the controls – stick forward, aft, left, right, rudder left, rudder right.

"Mooch, you ready?" he asks.

I run the fingers of my right hand across the top of the lower ejection handle – just for orientation purposes, of course – and answer, "Ready!"

He trades left-handed salutes with the cat officer. We both lean forward slightly into the straps – no self-respecting Tomcatter would take a cat shot with his melon against the headrest, a good way to get the old bell rung because of the way the airplane surges down before it jerks forward. A couple of potatoes and we're off.

Airborne.





F-4 Phantom of VF-2 on cat © DAVE BARANIK / PLANETPIX.COM





WE'RE FLYING A TOMCAT, BABY...!

And we're getting paid to do it.

And for the next few hours we stand ready to bring this machine, this amazing manifestation of American know-how and industrial will, to bear in whatever way required. Maybe today isn't our day to save the world. So we accommodate one of the small boy's requests for a fly-by. Or we break the sound barrier just because we can – and we're far enough above our fuel ladder to get away with it.

Of course I speak of days gone by. What remains of what once gave my working life such purpose will soon be found in aviation museums and on sticks in front of main gates. In the blink of an eye I've become the duffer with the ill-fitting cap and the weathered flight jacket who bores young ensigns – or any other fool who makes eye contact – with tales of derring-do. And don't. "VF, Baby..." I rail. "Those were REAL fighter squadrons." And by God, they were. Swordsmen, Pukin' Dogs, Grim Reapers, Diamondbacks – mascots of an adventure. At the center of it all was the airplane itself. And when an airplane has so much heart, personality, and character, it ceases to be inanimate to those who are privileged to strap it on.

So it's good-bye to a dear friend. Forgive my depression. I've heard the promises of a brighter technological future, and I'll give the new birds – named for an insect! – the benefit of the doubt. But my time in the arena was with you. I watch you zorch into the sunset and I wonder how it all could have passed so quickly. It doesn't seem that long ago when we were together, inextricably linked, one defining the other. Ours was a world of unlimited possibilities and missions accomplished. Ours was a world of victory.

So long, Big Fighter; blessed protector of the American way and our hides. We who knew you will miss your swagger, your raw power, your sheer class. Even in the face of technological advances you bowed to no other.

Thanks for the memories, Baby...!

WARD "MOOCH" CARROLL



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THE CLAWS COME OUT

The Tomcat had a hell of a time getting itself born.

It was the era of McNamara's Whiz Kids in the Pentagon, and they were fixated on a new fighter that could be flown in common by the Air Force and the Navy. That unfortunate bird was the TFX, which became the F-111. The F-111B was the Navy variant. Some wags called it "the deviant."

The thing was so underpowered, it couldn't generate the specified acceleration in mil power on approach to the ship. All the Navy tests were dismal, but the damn thing was on the track anyway.

A true American hero named Tom Connolly shut the project down in a Senate hearing. Called upon by Armed Services Committee chairman Senator John Stennis, Connolly bluntly reported,

"Mr. Chairman, all the thrust in Christendom couldn't make a Navy fighter out of that airplane."

The deviant died at that moment, and the Tomcat was born. VADM Connolly knew it was a career-ender, which it most certainly was.

But he did what had to be done.

PAUL "GATOR" GILLCRIST





Back in my earlier fighter pilot days, there was always much huffing and puffing about who was the best air combat stick, often in the form of a challenge by the less-established younger guys. My stock response to any such impudence was

“Any Time, Baby...!”

As the basic Tomcat decal was developing, we figured we’d be needing come catchy words to accompany the cartoon cat. Thus was “ATB” revived, much to the consternation, we learned, of that upstart aviation group then trying to bolster its gold-plated, overpriced Sparrow-shooter, the F-15.

NORM GANDIA

Major credit for the success of the F-14 should be given to Grumman’s initial F-14 Project Pilot, Bill Miller. As a Navy test pilot at Patuxent River he had been deeply involved in the testing of the nightmarish F-111B, and he carried the knowledge forward with a determination to avoid the problems plaguing that luckless design. I have never met a more talented, hard-working yet unassuming individual. His dedication of the airplane was such that had he been able to foresee his accidental death in F-14 Number Ten, I believe he wouldn’t have wavered one bit.

KURT SCHROEDER, GRUMMAN CHIEF TEST PILOT





During World War II the Grumman F7F night fighter was originally named for another outstanding night fighter; the tomcat. Some admiral cut that short, with a note saying that "the name 'Tomcat' denotes feline promiscuity and is not fitting and proper for a Navy fighter aircraft." So that superb bird became the Tigercat as a follow-on to the Wildcat and Hellcat programs. In 1969 Grumman again submitted the name Tomcat, and this time it passed muster. I suppose it didn't hurt that the three flags at the top who headed up the competition were all named Tom.

CORWIN "CORKY" MEYER

That's me flying the Tomcat for the Flight of the Cats display at the Miramar air show. I wanted the wings back, and it was gruesome. It was a rudder dance with AFCS. Before we hooked up with the photo bird, we were limited to about 200 knots by the Hellcat. You think these WWII fighters were fast – well, they weren't. Then we form up with the B-25 bomber for pictures. Tumor is hanging out of the waist with a camera. The bomber is firewalled, and he's doing 180 knots. You can see how much AOA I'm cranking in. The nose was doing the cobra wiggle big-time. But it was such an honor to fly wing on those great fighters of the past – I would have done it for free.

STEVE "WEB" KOEHLER





A pouce of Grumman 'Cat' - 1941 Hellcat, 1941 Beechcraft Tigercat, F-4 Tomcat © TORI TWOHEY / PLANETIX.COM







When we were testing the very first jets,
we often flew single-seat with a weighted dummy in back.
I came from a single-seat background, so it didn't bother me.
I remember my first flight out with a real-deal RIO.
He fired up that radar, and I nearly fell out of the seat.
It seemed like you could see the whole east coast.
I started to get the feeling for the power
the Tomcat would bring to the fight.

As part of the test program
I dropped the first bomb
that ever came off a Tomcat.

Actually "came off" is not quite accurate.

We hadn't done the separation
testing that is normal today.
I punched off the bomb and
it just hung under the jet like a puppy.
Lots of yelling and screaming
from the safety chase birds;
one guy was yelling
"Abort! Abort!"
as if that meant anything
under the circumstances.
I pulled pretty good positive
to get away from it,
and it followed right along underneath.
As I recall I had to pull a high-G snap roll
to escape the little devil.

CURT "DOZO" DOSÉ



High-G © GEORGE HALL / PLANETPIX.COM





Two guys were named to be skipper of the first two squadrons, and they flipped a coin in the Miramar O Club to see who would get which. Sam Leeds got VF-1, and Dick Martin got VF-2.

JACK “QUAIL” DANTONE

I was in the first cadre — number 24 to fly the jet. God, we had a terrible time with those first jets. They were like lemon cars. Electrical gremlins, and engines that routinely exploded or burned up. You were lucky to fly three hours a month. Your RIO was super-important, because he had to troubleshoot these inflight problems. He had the circuit breakers.

STEVE “HOSE” HUSAK



F-4 of VF-2 © BOB LAWSON / PLANETX.COM



F-14Ds launch AIM-54 Phoenix at drone © TORI TWOMEY / PLANEPK.COM



I still have a point paper I wrote in 1973 when I was the Tomcat OPEVAL officer at VX-4. I was trying to document all the gotchas and snags that were preventing realistic testing. Like can't shoot a Phoenix warhead over land – China Lake range too small. Have to go all the way to White Sands for the shot. Wait – can't shoot at White Sands either. Can't test the AIM-54 Miss Distance Indicator over land because it's radioactive and the AEC insists that it fall into DEEP water. Can't shoot the AIM-7 at all. All Sparrow shots are suspended after a GAC crew managed to shoot themselves down with one. There were a dozen more instances of desired outcomes running up against no reasonable alternatives. I ended the memo with this statement: Our attempts to OPEVAL the F-14A in an operational environment will be synonymous with the efforts of the preacher who set forth to build a church and somehow managed to erect a fornicatorium! It was made into a huge sign that hung in the project spaces for years. Hawk's career arc is yet again impinged upon.

MONROE "HAWK" SMITH





We couldn't really do anything in the early days.
 Mishaps had reduced our effectiveness to a laughable degree.
 No section takeoffs.
 No phone-booth dogfighting – the plane was too big.
 No low-level – somebody had hit a wire outside Yuma.
 No manual wing sweep –
 metal chips were showing up in the actuators.
 Nothing beyond 4Gs and mil power in aerial combat –
 try that combo with the wily A-4 Mongoose!
 We hacked away at the problems one by one,
 but it took a couple of decades to come up with
 a truly reliable fleet fighter.
 On my last flight in 1995 I did a section takeoff,
 dropped bombs at Dare County,
 honked around low-level
 and got in a bit of dogfighting with my wingman.
 It was a wonderful way to wind up nineteen years of Tomcat flying.
 Practically everything we did on that last hop
 would have been illegal in 1976.
 In that year there were three thump-bang fatal mishaps.
 The fleet's reliability was dismal.
 The Marines dropped out of the Tomcat program, citing costs,
 and with them went the budding air-to-ground mission.
 There were cost overruns on all fronts.
 Then two more landing crashes in Miramar;
 with four memorial services in as many days.
 But we were bulletproof,
 and we were flying the coolest jet in existence.
 The old guys all said, *This ain't nuthin'* –
The early days of the Crusader and Phantom were way worse.

PAUL “KID” MILES





F-4As of VF-151 © KATSUHIKO TOKUNAGA / PLANETX.COM

Loading F-14 squadron aboard Kitty Hawk © CJ HEATLEY / PLANEPX.COM



F-14A loaded on boat © CJ HEATLEY / PLANEPX.COM



There was a stretch back in the late '70s when Grumman was final-assembling Tomcats without engines. Pratt's delivery chain was seriously screwed up.

Grumman had a fixed-price contract with the Navy, which was unheard-of at the time, and they wanted the jets moved off their ramp on time.

So we had about a dozen engines that we literally drove back and forth across the country on flat-bed trucks.

A new jet would come in to Miramar; we'd pull its motors, put them on the truck, and two guys would drive the truck to Long Island nonstop.

A couple of those TF30s wound up with about 600 hours on them, all ferry time, nothing tactical at all.

This went on for months.

JAY "SPOOK" YAKELEY





HEAD of V-213 © TYSON HININGER / PLANETPIX.COM





VF-101 cat launch © TORI TWOMEY / PLANETPIX.COM



Short would bring in a bird from a cross-country.
He'd give the maintainers a thumbs up;
Jet's good to go, fellas.
Roger that, sir.

Then you'd start looking closer.
Over-G'd.
Leaking fluids.

We're going to be here all weekend on this one.

ROCKY RILEY



It was a constant challenge,
but the rewards could bring tears to your eyes.
I've been stabbed, cut, bruised, shocked, pinched, burned, and worse.
Smashed fingers.
I stood on my head until I was dizzy, going after FOD in the cockpit.
I even fell off the wing once.
Along the way I uttered every cuss word known to man,
and I may have invented a few.
But let some non-Tomcat sailor say a disparaging word about my jet,
and I'd rip him to pieces.

BRIAN "LINE RAT" HEGRAT







It came out of Viggies and into the early days of Tomcat TARPS.

A bunch of old RA-5 types, including
Dad Gaylor, John "Big Bird" Carter and Hoser,
had made the move to the F-14 as the pods showed up.
Southern California, gorgeous day, Tomcat FAM I hop,
"Jimmy Mac" MacArthur instructing in back.
People complained about how tough
the Tomcat was to get off the line and flying,
but it was great to get back into a fighter and 6.5 G maneuvers.
The Vig could go like stink but the old girl was limited to 3.5 Gs.
Stalls and zero-G recoveries at 30,000 feet –
back then we actually believed the bird couldn't be spun!
What fools we mortals be.
Now for some touch and goes at San Clemente,
but first a break at 15K overhead to try out
this new-to-me variable-geometry deal.
Righteous vapes coming off the glove vanes and looking cool.
Left break, throttles to idle, boards out, wings auto,
level on the reciprocal, gear and flaps down.
Immediately uncontrolled roll and a calm
"What the _____" from the rear office.
There we are, flat on our backs with three wheels down – or up.

Mac says dryly, "So Flats, how are we liking the Turkey so far?"

I rudder us right side up, cross-controlling
and retracting the flaps to see if that solves things.
It do. Broken torque tube, flaps partially retract,
and it's back to Miramar we go for an uneventful straight-in.

JIM "FLATS" FLAHERTY



The Tomcat was young and so was I when we first met in the 1970s.

I came out of Phantoms; as part of the initial cadre
I saw what it took to bring a new fighter into the fleet.
With VF-1 we took the airplane through its first cruise,
the first flat spins, lots of fires and "zing-thunk" failures
from the TF30s, the first barricade arrestment, and so on.
Lots of learning went on, and the F-14, which was always
ahead of its time, became better and better.
Six squadrons later I was NAVAIR program manager, and we finally
bested the attack mafia's aviation politics by creating the F-14D.
Here at last was the warfighter the Tomcat was always meant to be.
This time it was DOD and congressional politics that got in the way
of the new and remanufactured aircraft plan for the Tomcat fleet,
so we were unable to get this righteous Tomcat
into the hands of pilots and RIOs.
We pulled off a few sleight-of-hand advances by quietly
recreating the airplane's matchless air-to-ground capability,
which had always been there.
And there was a new computer, digital flight controls
and CADC to go with the magnificent GE engines.

My last flight as a fighter pilot was in the cockpit of my true love.

Life always passes too quickly,
but my memories of this airplane,
and those who flew in it,
and those who supported it,
will never fade.
It was a special fighter in a special time.

JACK "GRINGO" SNYDER





CAT SCRATCH FEVER

Some days everything just falls together.

We're on a Key West det, and we're tasked to fight 4V4 with F-15s out of Tyndall. They're up in the Florida panhandle, so we'll be in the areas over the Gulf of Mexico. And they're students – it's like the F-15 RAG. We figure they're students, let's give 'em a lesson.

So after the phone brief, we get off early and fly low right up the middle of Florida instead of going due north over the water. They're all scanning south, and we come at them low from their nine o'clock.

We shoot them all with Sparrows before they know where we are. Then we pull in to them and kill them again with Sidewinders.

They had one instructor with them in a two-seater. He said in the debrief that he saw us but kept quiet. I'm not so sure, but that's OK.

The Phoenix wasn't in the rules, but for the hell of it we also shot them all from somewhere over Disney World. The radar was just perfect.

On the way home, I remember thinking about the amazing power a Tomcat brings to the fight. I also remember thinking, this is extremely cool.

DAVE "BIO" BARANEK





On the ground © J. HEATLEY / PLANETPIX.COM



A civilian in the cockpit, sitting in back in a borrowed flight suit and a too-tight torso harness, wearing a grin the size of Montana. I had actually studied my NATOPS procedures so I could handle startup and shutdown without looking like a goon. My pilot, John "Rhino" Einhorn, said our departure might be a bit uncomfortable, as we had to avoid some protected swampland or something.

The G pull was the most bizarre feeling I had ever experienced. When Einhorn inquired after my well-being, he heard only a low groan on the ICS. This was the beginning of the flight, remember.

Rhino said, "Good luck, pal — that was two Gs."

JEFF BOBROW





F-4D © RICHARD VANDERHEULEN / PLANETPIX.COM



I never had any real trouble instructing from the back seat, with no controls.

As long as your student would listen, it went fine. In the '70s several countries were thinking about buying Tomcats.

We hosted the Japanese at Bethpage, and I took their Air Force chief for a hop.

This guy had flown in the third wave at Pearl Harbor: When we landed, he said he wanted to get in front.

His English was extremely limited.

We did a quick trip around the pattern with an interpreter in the tower:

There'd be an exchange in Japanese, and then the tower would say,

"He wants to put the canopy down." Imagine that for a half hour:

It was a white-knuckle hop for me – the guy flew just fine.

On landing he was very gracious, gave me a little camera as a gift.

Some public affairs type rushes forward and says, "Give it back!

No gifts allowed!"

I said, "Hey, screw that,

I earned this camera."

JAY "SPOOK" YAKELEY





We had brand-new airplanes,
and I took one up for some checks,
including the glove vanes.
You go to about Mach 1.35
to get the vanes to program.
I had Glen "Crumbs" Crumley in back.

I said to Crumbs, *You ever been to Mach 2?*
No, skipper:
Want to try it?
Sure.

We burn it to Mach 2 and a little over.
No problem.
Then I come out of burner,
and as soon as I touch the throttles,
both intake duct ramps go to the full open position.
They're supposed to be way down,
to keep the supersonic air out of the engine.
I have never felt something buck, shake, jump,
cough, sputter; and carry on like that.
You couldn't see the windscreen.
I yelled to Crumbs, *how do you like Mach 2 now?*
Back through 1.2, and it disappeared.
No harm done.

But Crumbs was never very enthusiastic
about going supersonic after that.

“RICK “WIGS” LUDWIG



F-4 Phantom II vapor © BOB LAWSON / PLANETX.COM



Vandy Flight F-4S and F-4H © BOB LAWSON COLLECTION / PLANETX.COM



F-4A Temat © GEORGE HALL / PLANETX.COM



Everyone always loved
the black Vandy jets at VX-9.
We had a beautiful Phantom
when I became the skipper:
Playboy Bunny on the tail, back before
that sort of thing became impossible.
One day I was looking at maintenance
stats for the different planes.
Something like 352 work hours
per flight hour for the F-4s.
I told the MO, they're outta here.

Off to the boneyard.
Everybody was asking me what jet
we were going to paint black.

I decided we'd have
a nice democratic vote.

Then Moon Vance,
our Northrop Grumman rep,
offers to paint one of our Tomcats.

For free.

That was the end
of the democratic election.
They built a booth at Mugu
for the job.

Used all the best materials,
including a few that were
probably illegal in California.

The result was the most beautiful
shiny Tomcat that ever was.
That thing was fast as stink.

RICK "WIGS" LUDWIG



It's hard to believe,
but the Navy almost handed
the Tomcat project
over to McDonnell Douglas.
They thought their experience
building thousands of Phantoms
put them out front.
We at Grumman hadn't done
a proper sales job with our design.
Some of our higher-ups had told us
never to mention the F-111,
since the Navy had such
hatred for that program
and the way
it was almost stuffed
down their throats.
But we had done excellent work
as the prime F-111 subcontractor,
cranking out 40 sets a month.
We'd put hundreds of successful
test hours on the Navy variants.
And the airplane was
a swing-wing design
that made the Phantom
look like the Wright flyer.
Same engines and radar
as the first Tomcats.
We finally got the real story
across to the Navy,
and the Tomcat went to Grumman.

CORWIN "CORKY" MEYER



F-14 vertical © BOB LAWSON / PLANETPIX.COM





I had the good fortune to put considerable time on all three tits
Navy airplanes of the modern age: the F-8, the F-4 and the F-14.

The Crusader was a real man's airplane, God in the cockpit, all that.
And dropping the hammer on those four guns was some experience.

A pretty good fighter clean and high —
get below 350 knots and just about anyone would eat you up.

It was the worst carrier jet of modern times,
with its variable incidence wing for livable approach speeds.

An awful lot of them hit the ramp.

The Phantom was a whole new animal.
Powerful, stable and forgiving — actually spinnable.

Great at low altitudes.

Fly it like an F-8 and you'll lose the fight.

Fly it pure vertical with hard turns at both ends, and you'll win.

For my first 500 hours I was saying, *No wonder we always thrashed this thing.*
For my second 500 hours I was saying, *How did we EVER thrash this thing?*

The Turkey — what an airframe.
Lacking in thrust right from the start, yet amazingly agile.

Great around the boat.

Where the F-8 was nightmarish, punishing a moment's inattention,
and where the Phantom was fuel-critical from the time the wheels came up,
the Tomcat was reasonably stable and reassuring.

You had to fly it every instant, of course.

But it was nice and slow, tons of lift,
enough gas for a good three passes before you went tanker-hunting.
It's the obvious choice when you absolutely, positively have to fly in impossible weather
where your only bingo field has a big two-digit number painted on the island.

JOHN "MASHER" CARRIER



Initial over Independence © DANA POTTIS / PLANETX.COM



F-4N cat © BOB LAWSON COLLECTION / PLANETX.COM



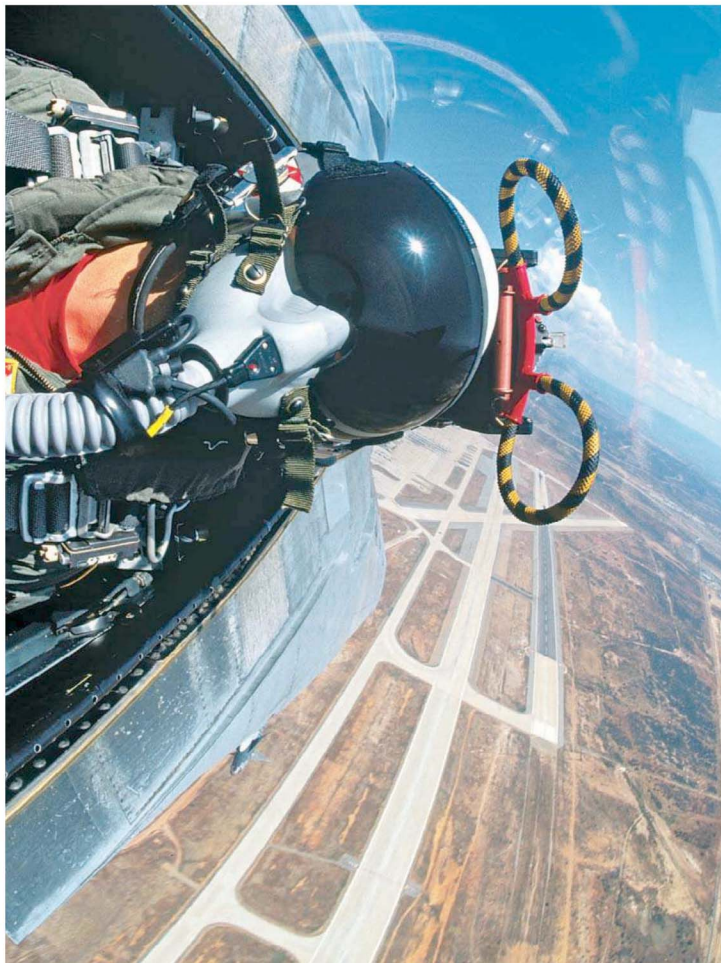
F-8 Crusader on cat © DAVE BARANEK / PLANETX.COM





About five times a year we'd load a C-9 plus eight Turkeys
and head for Key West, VFR heaven on the east coast.
First brief was 0500, and we'd regularly turn
two or three sections a day, with hard chargers logging four.
We gave our schedule to the ice cream lady,
who presumably wasn't a Communist.
Sure enough, she'd show up at the hot pad shack
just before each debrief.
Adult supervision was minimal.
I was a new LCDR and the senior officer:
We flew the Tomcat to the edge of the world on each hop –
usually to include the infamous flip-flop.
Jet vertical, bleed off all airspeed, tail slide, swap ends.
No sweat.
After the last knock-it-off we'd point 'em east
and descend past the city, lower the nose, sweep the wings
and fly a righteous break.
In no time we were in our favorite chairs at Sloppy Joe's
or watching the sunset from Mallory Dock
with the various Conch Republic loonies.
We were all young then, the airplane and the people.
We couldn't imagine a day
when the big fighter would be retired.
The bird was ahead of its time,
and at Key West we learned to fight it and trust it.
We learned so much about ourselves and each other:
We forged friendships that remain to this day.
Hard to think about never again seeing
a section of Turkeys in the break,
but for those who flew it the vision will always be there.

LIN "YANK" RUTHERFORD



Break © TONY TWOHIEY / PLANETPIX.COM





AIM-9 Missiles at Roosevelt Roads.
We were so short of targets
that we had six fangs-out fighters,
plus safeties, going after one pitiful little TALD.
The plan was for an intrepid S-3 driver
to lead the gaggle into the range and
then pickle the little heat source.
Everyone had one or two Sidewinders,
and everyone had this teeny little target
between them and their COMPEX "E."
The huge line-abreast formation went
simultaneously No Joy
as the tiny heat-emitter flashed past.
When the outboard jet finally locked the TALD
all by himself, the formation became, well, less disciplined.
The Range Safety Observer called,
"99, with tally and buzzer, you're cleared to fire!"
The immediate five-missile salvo –
one guy never did see it – was a sight to behold!
Even more impressive was the debris field caused by the
Boola Boola of one missile –
I'm sure it was mine –
on the hapless TALD.
Even more impressive was
the ensuing nine-plane octoflugeron,
each of us trying to avoid fragging ourselves
while avoiding the other eight aircraft
that had been boresighting the same piece of sky
only a second earlier!
Fox Two, Baby...!

JOHN "STASH" FRISTACHI



F-4 Phantom II speed © GEORGE HALL / PLANETPIX.COM



F-4 or VF-213 © KATSUHIKO TOKUNAGA / PLANETPIX.COM

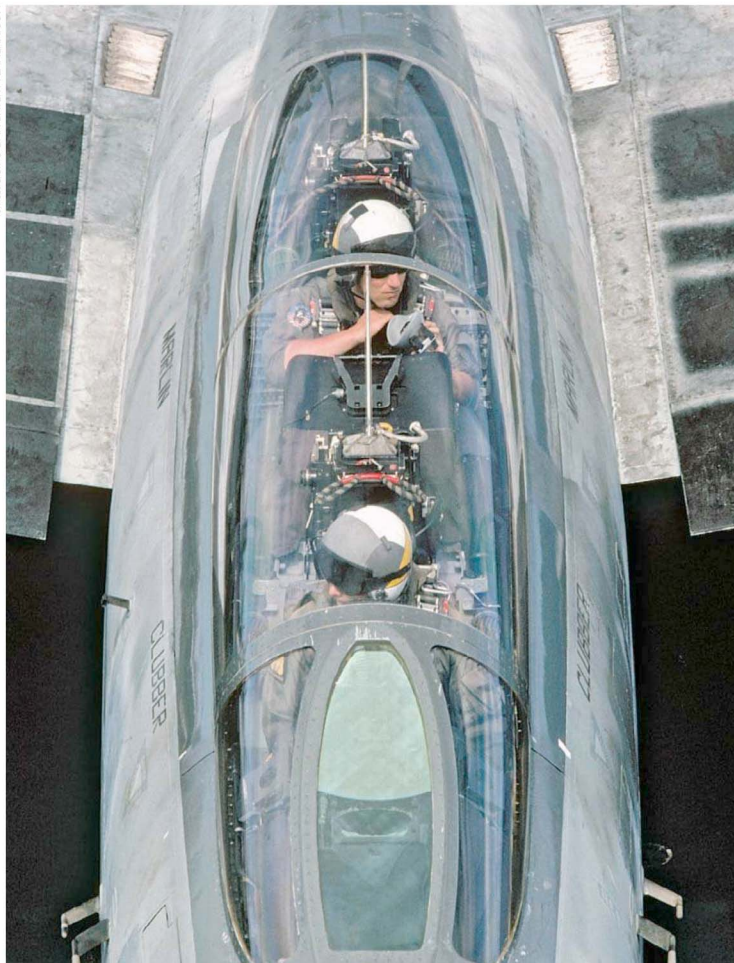


When I had VF-213, we had so many engines out at one point that there wasn't room for them on the floor. There was one engine, nobody could fix the damn thing. Not our kids, not the Pratt tech guys. The thing would race and go into burner; all by itself, with no warning. But we had so many motors out, we had to put it back in and fly it. I made sure nobody flew that jet except the XO, the maintenance officer and me. I don't think we ever did figure it out.

MONROE "HAWK" SMITH



035



BULLSEYE

My very first F-14 flight was with an illustrious F-8 pilot and RAG instructor, Magic Morris.

In the brief, he lit one cigarette off the other constantly. "I'm the sole survivor of my F-8 RAG class, so what's another smoke?" he muttered, wreathing himself in a cloud of unfiltered smoke. Indeed.

He snatched one more in the hold-short for good luck.

We spent that whole flight in the only clear space around Oceana, cloud surfing between 2000 and 3000 feet, 350 knots and 6.5 Gs, screaming for more.

On final, another cigarette unlit in his lips, Magic growled, "You know, Booger, they aren't going to let me fly this beauty much longer. One of these days, I'm just going to plant one right in the damn dirt. Hate to take a nice kid like you with me."

KELLY "BOOGER" BARAGAR



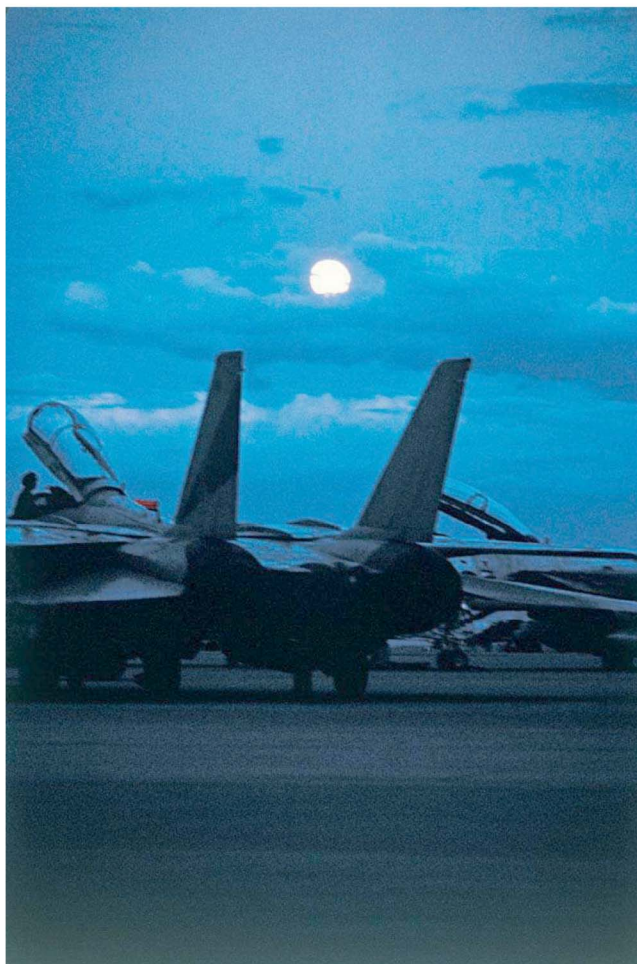
I get questions about Ladies' Night at the Miramar club.
Was it really that wild?
I have to tread lightly here.
It was wilder, if anything.
Realize that this is all light years away
from conditions in the Navy today.

Back then, the big night was Wednesday.
The base was normally closed to visitors,
but once a week the gate cops would let the girls in.
And they showed up by the hundreds.
Many were there every week.
Some of these girls were cold steel.
They knew more about Miramar ops than we did, I swear.
They knew all the patches, all the ranks, how to tell a pilot from an NFO.
And believe me, they were after the Tomcat guys.
You were, say, some Hawkeye geek in there, or Coast Guard,
you were invisible.
Sorry, fellas.

I remember one night there's two Marines at the pay phones,
each calling the wife:
"Sorry, honey, the jet broke.
We gotta stay at Miramar tonight.
I'll be back in the morning.
Nothing we can do, sweetheart."

Of course the Tailhook flap changed everything.
And face it, the whole climate was pretty wild.
But fun while it lasted? You bet.

TOM "SOBS" SOBIECK



F-14 moonlight © BOB LAWSON / JPLNETX.COM





038

FEET WET



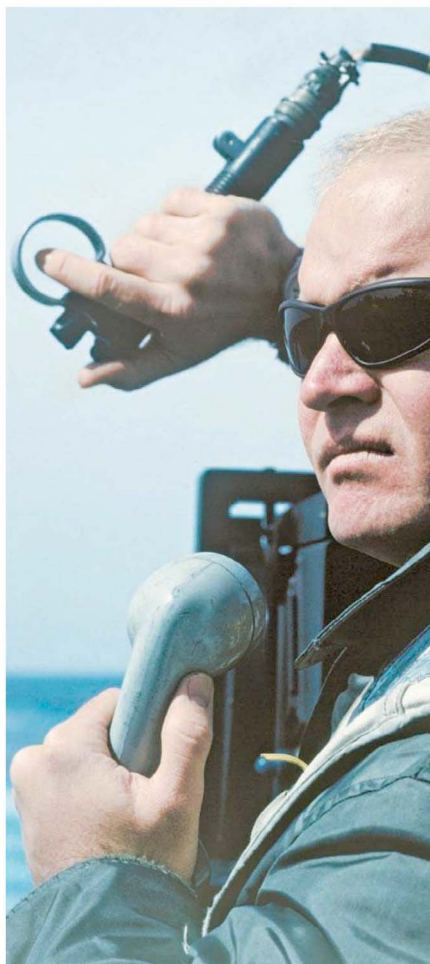
CAT TRAP

I started out with 300 Phantom traps before switching to the F-14. That thing would come down to the wire like it was on rails. Very stable. You just had to make sure to keep the power and speed just right – it could drop out from under you over the ramp. The Tomcat, on the other hand, had to be flown right up until you set the brakes. Watch Tomcats on final – every control surface wiggling, lots of power changes.

I got pretty good at traps – day traps, that is – after about 1000 tries. For me the trick was visualizing the 3-wire, and the whole deck, rather than fixating on every little movement of the ball.

Night traps, I'm still not sure how they work.

A TOMCAT DRIVER



Landing Signal Officer Josh "Flapper" Sager grading a carrier trap © KATSUHIKO TOKUNAGA / PLANEPX.COM





F-4E © KATSUHIKO TOKUNAGA / PLANETPIX.COM





Let's see: 14 cruises, 1415 Tomcat traps,
4500 hours in the jet – I've flown
with an awful lot of West Coast pilots, and they
each had their cute little ways of terrorizing me.
Once my magnificently salty flight jacket,
the envy of all Miramar, was kidnapped
from my stateroom and held for cruel ransom.
I finally got it back,
and I almost got killed in the process.
I was coming back from a faraway night cap
with a RAG-fresh nugget.
Long story short, lots of trouble
getting on board, and then lots of trouble tanking.
We tell the tanker to head for the ship
so we can jump out alongside.
Tanker bubba says he has no idea where the
ship is – and then the basket goes sour.
I got the ship to turn on the TACAN
and we're 65 miles away.
Getting worse and worse:
We're down to no-shit 600 pounds
when the gas finally starts to flow.
We finally call the ball, and I add,
"Now it would be nice to find my jacket!"
The skipper was standing there holding
my coat for me when I climbed down.
The poor nugget was so spent he couldn't taxi –
he just shut down, or flamed out, in the wires.
Practiced tanking every chance he got after that.
That jacket's in the Pensacola museum today.

DAN "DARTH" CAIN



F-14A of VF-154 over Corbie © BILL PINICH / PLANETX.COM





It was Jasper up front and Casper in back,
coming home from a Bosnia hop.
We were almost in the wires
when we got the wave-off.

Wait a minute — we WERE in the wires.

I felt the jet shudder to a midair halt.
We towed the boat for a split second,
and then we fell out of the sky.
The Grumman-built Tomcat
dropped onto the deck nose-first.
Stuff in the cockpit was flying everywhere.
It felt like an awful crash,
but all body parts were accounted for:
Boss said, "216, you OK?"
"Yes, sir"

"OK, lights on deck!"
My neck and back were killing me,
and I didn't fly for a few days.
But the jet was checked over;
and it flew the next cycle.

Paddles told me if it had been a Hornet
they would have parted it out
and pushed it overboard,
the struts sticking through the engines.

But not the Mighty Tomcat.
Strong like train, Baby...!

JERRY "JASPER" COLEMAN





F-14 cat shot © TORI TWOHEY / PLANETPIX.COM



Flight operations / US NAVY OFFICIAL PHOTO — PM DEREK ALLEN

F-14 on cat and crane USS Texas CGN-39 © KEITH CHAPMAN / FLANERX.COM



We caught a horrible I-wire
one night off Norway.

The ball was all over the place,
and it turned out the wind
was up around 70 knots.
God only knows how much
the deck was moving.

I think it's the only time
I ever felt fear in a jet —
those few dreadful
moments willing old Tom
to clear the ramp.

No sweat.

Ain't it odd.
I survive an F-8 cruise,
do a couple in Phantoms, and
it's the safe-as-houses Turkey
that gives me my biggest
landing thrill.

Of course,
in the first jet
I'd have been dead.

In the second jet
we'd have been dead.

JOHN "MASHER" CARRIER





F-14 cat shot off Kitty Hawk © TONY TWOHIEY / PLANETPIX.COM



046

F-4M cat lunch © BARRY SMITH / PLANETX.COM





There I was, a teenage VF-102 plane captain.
In the Diamondbacks we treated our jets as *ours*.
The plane captain manned the jet
for a twelve-hour shift regardless of weather.
After launch we'd help our fellow PCs carry tie-downs,
drain buckets, and occasionally a collapsed PC trainee.
Hard to believe we'd actually heft twenty chains, ten pounds each,
then follow the jet around the deck until the yellow shirts spotted it.
To broiling or freezing temps you could add pitching decks,
jet blast, E-2 props, huffers and more.
But I can remember the hardships melting away
as I watched "my" jet take a cat stroke at sunset,
40-foot white flame blinding your eyes and rattling your teeth.

KEN HUTTON



► TALK TO THE HAND

The new kids probably don't know what that open hand means.
We old A-model types launched in full burner.
I loved shooting jets, and I'd always jump
when it was time to light the pipes.
It was known as the "Patented Bisket Bounce."
I thought a Tomcat in Zone V deserved a special send-off.

JOHN "BISKET" BISKADUROS



Bisket Shooter © DAVE PARSONS / PLANETPIX.COM





I had the honor of leaving my Eagle behind and doing a Tomcat exchange tour for two years. I bagged about 120 traps and got in some Operation Southern Watch time with VF-211. I loved flying the A-model, even though the cockpit and systems were a bit primitive compared to the F-15C. It's good to remind yourself how to do this stuff the old-fashioned way. And I didn't mind having a RIO. Not at all. My Eagle buddies think that sucks. But I started life in the back seat of a recon Phantom, so I have an appreciation for GIBs.

Probably the strangest thing for an Air Force exchange pilot was that business of grading every landing. Very intimidating.

You think everybody gets to have a bad day now and then?

Forget about it.

DOUG "NORTON" CARNEY





Jolly Rogers Luffy, Lawrence and Topo Ariza man up on the © JOHN CETRINO / PLANETPIX.COM



With VF-102 on the ship we'd all suit up together in the PR shop. No big deal. One winter day we had to get into dry suits, and CAG was coming on the hop. This was new to him. We all just stripped down, Sweaty and me plus the guys. He thought we did it for his benefit, but we didn't. I don't think. He did blush a bit.

SARAH "NOONER" FRANSON





F-40 at VF-31 on water cat © FORTYFOUR/FILANEX.COM



The girls claim they weren't setting me up, but I know better. I've had enough experience with fighter pilot humor. They did suit up together all the time. Noonan confessed later that she and Sweaty thought about pulling it off with thong underwear, but they chickened out.

PHIL "FILTHY" GRANDFIELD



FEET DRY

People go back and forth
about women in combat.

Try this for size.

As far as is known,
there has only been one
all-female combat hop
in the Tomcat.

Sweaty up front
and Nooner in back.

Not only did the girls
lay waste via bomb and bullet –
Sweaty flew close to
NINE HOURS
without taking a leak.

I defy you to try that,
man, woman or child.

Of course the piddle packs
won't work for the girls,
and Sweaty eschewed
the *Depend* solution.

So she held it.

There was quite
a knock-kneed jog
from the jet's ladder
to the lady's head.

But instead of a Navy Cross
she just got CAG pissed off –
so to speak.

He ordered up *Depend* shields
for all female types, like it or not.

DAVE "HEY JOE" PARSONS





Backseat driver © KATSUHIKO TOKUNAGA / PLANETX.COM



F-2211 Christmas © RICK LUNN/AS / PLANETX.COM



The Tomcat was THE machine once it got those amazing GE I 10 motors.

It turned into a beast,
King Kong,
the hottest babe,
your best and only girl.

Just seeing those big 'Cats parked on the ramp, waiting for you, then standing up top of the beast post-flight and feeling the last rumbles as the motors wound down – nothing like it, then, now, or ever.

TOM "TRUCK" PIELUSZCZAK



The GE I 10 engine was phenomenal – it instantly made the Tomcat the beast it always should have been.

Mil power was equivalent to Zone III or IV with the TF30s. And no coughs, Baby...

The popular demonstration item was the zoom climb. Begin at 5k, maybe 330 knots, light 'em up and climb vertically like the space shuttle. You were actually accelerating through 20k, with pushover above 45k.

I well remember a FAM flight with one of the first Super CAGS, an old A-6 BN, Fox Fallon. We're in the middle of the space shuttle acceleration and I hear;

"Oooh, Basic!"

Just like my wife!

"Basic, this thing really goes!"

BOB "BASIC" WRIGHT





F-4A out takeoff © DAN BAYER / PLANETPIX.COM



During our 1977 RIMPAC cruise we were having constant electrical problems. We discovered that two different vendors had provided wire to Grumman. Odd-numbered BuNos had the bad wire, while the even-numbered jets – all of them in our sister squadron – were doing relatively OK. Every trip to the catapult was a dice roll. Would your spoilers work? Would multiple circuit breakers pop? Then monsoon season in the Pacific made things worse. We would pull 30 percent of our breakers before applying power to the plane. And they'd stay out for five minutes, until the engines and air conditioning could dry things out. I think the jets all had to be rewired over time.

PAUL “KID” MILES



F-4s parked on deck at RIMPAC 1977. © BOB LAWSON / PLANETRX.COM



Daytime in the IO, 1984.

I was manning a jet with Rooster Coburn.

He stayed up front while I ran back into the ship for something.

I left my beautiful red-and-white Diamondback helmet
on the seat because of the heat.

While I was away a tow tractor and entourage
showed up to move our jet to the cat.

The deck surface was exceptionally slippery – like a dirty frying pan.

The ship started a port turn,

and it started wallowing something awful in the troughs of the waves.

The jet-and-tractor hookup slid to the center of the deck
and then back to the scuppers,

the tires on the tow rig spinning and smoking like a dragster.

Suddenly the jet was over the edge and pointing upward like the *Titanic*.

The tractor was still connected and halfway to the stars itself.

Another good wave did it.

The jet broke from the tow, flipped on its back and sank instantly.

This was the newest and sweetest jet on the boat, a Block 110 TARPS
bird that smelled like a new car – it was gone in a blink.

Rooster had given up working the hand-pump brake and had bailed
out from about fifteen feet up – he ripped a chunk out of his nose on
the way down, flopped semiconscious and fell face-down on the deck.
Then the tractor crashed down only inches away.

There was a huge pool of blood, and the maintainers thought he was
dead. People on the rail yelled and pointed to my helmet, left on the
seat and now floating alongside – *Stew is dead, too!*

He couldn't get out before it sank!

I wandered into our ready room, completely oblivious to the drama.

Shocked faces all around.

Like Doctor Frankenstein: *He's Alive!*

STEW "BUNDLES" MILLER







There I am in the back seat,
nothing I can do.
This pilot was a brilliant Tomcat driver;
but this was his night in the barrel.
We bolted a half-dozen times,
went to get gas
and bounced about six more.
He just couldn't get it down,
and the harder he tried,
the worse the downward spiral got.
By now we're exhausted, terrified
and just about out of options.
I don't want to talk too much;
I'm afraid to make things worse.
But finally I'm so exasperated I blurt,
"You gotta put us on the deck –
I can't swim!"
He says, 'Sobs, what are you
talking about? You're in the Navy!"
I say, "Look, if I could swim, I woulda
been out of here about an hour ago."
After that I pretty much shut up.
This is major Indian Ocean blue water;
so it's the deck or the drink.
He finally snagged us an ugly 4-wire
on attempt number 13, and we both
did some serious deck-kissing.
He never had a night like that again,
and went on to be a CAG LSO.
It can happen to anybody.

TOM "SOBS" SOBIECK



We were downwind for a night re-
covery, when I suddenly get this awful
cramp in my pectoral muscle.
I blurt out, *Jesus, my chest!*
God's own heartburn or something.

A few months previously
a VF-161 pilot had a
mild heart attack in the jet,
and it had been a very close call.

As it faded I looked at my
nugget RIO in the mirrors.
Eyes like saucers back there.

I quickly said,
Just a muscle spasm.
I'll be fine.

He never admitted it, but I think
his fingers were dancing along
the lower handle.

In that light, I can now think of
at least four things you don't want
to hear on the intercom:
1/ *What the ——— was that?*
2/ *Oh, shit.*
3/ *We have a problem.*
4/ *Gasp – pain in my chest!*

JOHN "MASHER" CARRIER



F-14 CAG takeoff at sunset © FORT TWOMEY / PLANETX.COM



F-14D sunset © KATSUHIKO TOKUNAGA / PLANETX.COM





One of our nugget RIOs, after a night trap, stood around on the deck waiting and waiting. He asked his pilot why it took so long for him to get out of the cockpit after parking and engine shutdown. The pilot, an experienced combat veteran, said he needed time for his knees to stop shaking before he could climb down the ladder. The RIO never looked at night traps the same way again.

CJ "HEATER" HEATLEY



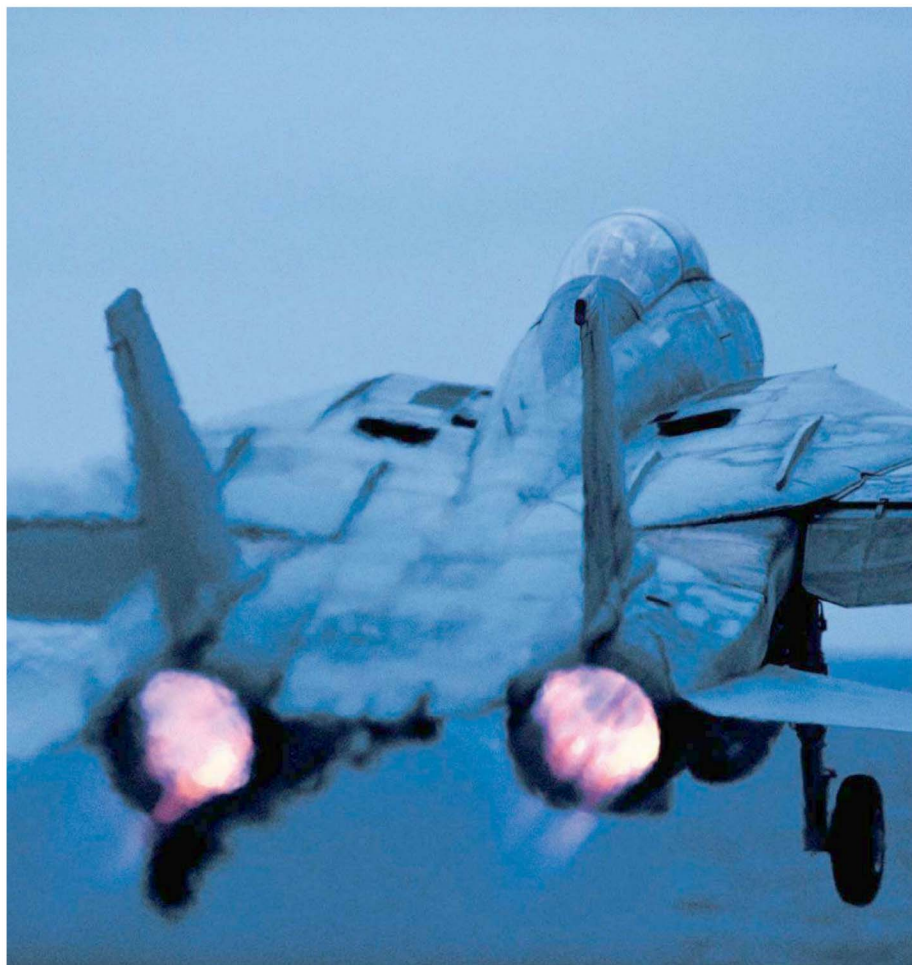
P-47 night trap © GEORGE HALL / PLANETPX.COM





I was CO of VF-14 in 1974 – early times for the Tomcat. We were down in the PROA for final training and ORE. In rapid succession two A-7s damage the middle wires. We're suddenly down to the 1 and the 4 on a crummy night. Our last bird makes a great pass, deftly snagging the 4-wire. Which parts at the first tug. They're too fast to stop and too slow to do anything except dribble off the deck. The RIO pulls the handle and the bird rolls into the water after a short dance of death. The crew was picked up OK. Then I heard over the IMC an invitation for me to report to the bridge for a post-mortem chat with the CO. A light attack pilot, he opined that the boys could have pulled it out if they had hung with it. I said we weren't there in that cockpit – but they were. They made the decision, and I backed it.

"BUD" DOUGHERTY



Full burner © TONY WOREY / PLANETRIX.COM





It was a dark and stormy night.

No, really, it was.

Extra-crappy, in fact, with heavy overcast and the *Forrestal's* famous rolling deck. Boltered the first pass, and that was the smoothest deck I was going to see all night. The rolling got worse, I got more tired and scared, and suddenly it was night in the barrel time.

It went something like this:

pitching deck waveoff, foul deck waveoff, another foul deck waveoff, bolter; hook-skip bolter; technique waveoff.

Since there was nothing else to screw up, it was time for the famous We-Land-Now-Goddammit I-wire, for which some sightless, whining LSO awarded me a no-grade. After duly kissing the deck

I slunk to my stateroom.

There was my trusty RIO, who'd been mercifully silent through the whole evolution. He should remain nameless, but for the sake of the story let's call him "Vegas."

As I shuck my gear he turns and hands me a perfect, dry, gin-and-gin martini. Thank God for good friends and our decision to violate certain shipboard drinking rules.

STEVE "DIRT" CALLAGHAN



Even though night landings are the scariest thing on God's great earth, I must say that I fondly remember those night hops with great viz and a full moon. To this day, when I see that bright moon, I think of my fellow aviators at sea who may be at the ship under the same cool light.

I remember nights in the marshal stack, trying to hit the push time exactly. I liked watching guys below me, in burner, trying to make their times at the right distance from the boat.

JERRY "JASPER" COLEMAN



Dusk trap © TORI TWOHEY / PLANETX.COM



America and her crew were put through the wringer for months. All blue-water ops, total EM-CON, water temps around 40 degrees. The deck never stopped pitching – green water routinely came up over the bow, and tie-down chains had to be doubled up on all aircraft. Cat shots were a leap of faith, given the deck movement. The shooter would wait until the deck was at its lowest moment – the idea was that in the few seconds after the shot the deck would reach its apex and shoot us into the air instead of the ocean. The cruise was unbelievably exhausting – but every aircrew got at least 100 “wartime” traps, and we were truly forged by fire. The subsequent deployment to the Indian Ocean, with a firewatch on Iran after Desert One, was like a huge vacation.

JACK “JJ” MITCHARD





F-4 over ramp of Kitty Hawk © TONY HOWEY / PLANETX.COM



FROM ZERO TO SIXTY

Just as we merged — range inside 1000 feet — a missile came off the lead bogey's left wing, leaving a white smoke trail as it passed below and down our left side.

Hank immediately identified them as Fitters.

They were in close parade formation.

Music was pointing right at us, high and to our right. He also saw the missile come off the rail.

In our hard turn across the bogey's tail there was no discussion in the cockpit or between aircraft about what to do.

It happened unexpectedly and very quickly.

All four of us reacted just like it was a 2V2 on the TACTS range.

The Libyans split up at the pass.

The lead climbed and turned lazily to the east, as if he were watching Hank and me chase his wingman.

We don't believe the lead Libyan ever saw Music and Amos because of their wide separation at the pass.

Music fell in right behind him at a half mile.

Hank had a good AIM-9L tone, but it was quickly drowned out by the huge early morning sun ball sitting on the east horizon.

As we turned south, I was looking out behind us to keep Music and his bogey in sight.

Hank let our guy clear the sun, and the Sidewinder reacquired the Fitter.

My first clue of Hank firing was the white plume I saw behind us.

I whipped around in my seat to see our AIM-9L smoke trail and the impact on the Fitter's tail.

Hank had a heart-of-the-envelope shot about 45 degrees off the tail at a half mile.

We saw the Fitter go out of control and the pilot eject.

As his main chute deployed we flew right past him, 500 feet away.

We picked up Music and Jim north of us when we saw the smoke from their Sidewinder go right up the tailpipe of the lead Libyan.

There was an ejection from the black smoke ball, but we never saw a chute.

We rolled out with Music and Amos on our right and headed north back to Nimitz after looking for other Libyan aircraft.

Only sixty seconds had elapsed since the lead Fitter fired his Atoll.

DAVE "DJ" VENLET





Images on the page © FORTY TWO / FORTY TWO.COM



I always thought of the Phoenix
as a crazed little Kamikaze
hanging under your belly.

Or six of them.

It's just a fearsome missile.
First of all, it's huge.
A thousand pounds, with
a 132-pound warhead.
You guide it in semi-active, and
then it completes the intercept
with its own radar and autopilot.
The thing comes off the jet
and climbs under power
to over 80,000 feet.
Then it unloads and drops
on the target at Mach 4-plus.

There's so much kinetic energy,
it's going to knock any airplane
in half, even if the warhead fails.
I got to shoot three of them,
and every one worked perfectly.
Of course you'd never hang
all six on the A-model.
Even Bs and Ds had a hard time
with all that weight and drag.

But God, what a pit bull.

TOM "SOBS" SOBIECK





F-14B with full Phoenix loadout © TORI TOWMEY / PLANETX.COM



On the *Kennedy* they called us “peeping Tomcatters.” We had just gotten the brand-new TARPS capability.

In summer 1983 the Marine barracks was bombed in Beirut with terrible loss of life – the Marines were pinned down near the airport by Syrian forces above them.

We steamed for the Med with *Independence*.

In operational terms we had to change gears overnight from fleet defense and alpha strikes to low-altitude penetration, surgical strike, and high-speed TARPS runs.

Tomcats immediately began flying missions over the beach to the tune of 39 TARPS hops with F-14 escort.

We found out quickly that the Syrian enemy had all kinds of black trash: 57mm AAA, bigger guns, and SA6 or SA7 missiles.

We needed to prove that the Tomcat was the fastest sea-level jet anyone had ever seen.

For starters we left the AIM-54s and tanks behind.

NAVAIR came through with a release of NATOPS speed restrictions.

We added rifle scopes and commercial Fuzzbusters in every cockpit.

Mission after mission we got shot at – with very limited results.

But God, did we tear up those Grumman Ironworks birds.

Every sortie came back missing panels, refueling doors and paint – even chaff/flare dispensers.

On one flight I saw a truck-mounted SA7 battery let go with six missiles on my beam,

but at our speed they couldn’t catch up and guide.

It was the real deal.

CHUCK “MUMBLES” SCOTT





F-14 afterburner © DAVE BAKANIK / PLANETPIX.COM



US and Egyptian juggle over Pyramids © JOHN LILLARD / FLANERX.COM

SPHINX CAT

Bright Star was an all-out fighter exercise we used to fly over Egypt. They were flying Mirage IIIs and MiGs at the time. After several days of Mirages but no MiGs, we led up to the grand finale. It was an air wing strike on Cairo West, as I recall. The Hawkeye started calling bogies all over the place. We dropped down to 10k, jumped four Egyptian Mirages, killed them all and blew on through. One minute the sky is empty, and then the E-2 guys are yelling. We hit a cloud of 20 MiG-19s and 21s. We smoked 'em and smoked 'em until they were out of gas. We shot a couple on final, as well as two C-130s, then formed up for our prebriefed Pyramids fly-by. We pulled off for the ship, and all of a sudden we had MiG-21s all over us. Sneaky devils, with their hot pits! We hassled them until they again ran out of gas. On to the ship, Charlie on arrival, 3-wires all around. Routine, Baby...!

TOM "LTF" FOSTER





Operation DESERT FOX was a furious couple of days – retribution against Saddam's SAM sites and bunkers. The Iraqis, in usual fashion, were right back at it a week later.

I was the lead RIO of a section of Tomcats and a division of Hornets that re-entered the box. Toward the end of our window the enemy launched. The initial picture showed two MiG-23s, but they turned away in an apparent attempt to suck us in. By then the contact that had our attention was a MiG-25 dropping in on us, high and fast. We ramped up to 40,000 feet and Mach 1.2 – he was doing well over 1.5. We launched the first Phoenix in anger from – well, from pretty far away. Our wingman also had a good release. But neither missile had a good rocket motor: The Foxbat kept coming, coming into the heart of the envelope. He turned just as we were dancing on the Iranian border; and we were instructed not to go to the merge. We couldn't dwell on the failure of the rocket motors, or we'd spend the rest of our lives muttering, "We coulda been a contender."

Then to add to the confusion there was a report of a fireball. It turned out that one of the Floggers flamed out on final and crashed short of the runway.

As our CAG reflected, "Screw him – a kill is a kill."

BOB "JUMBY" CASTLETON





074

FHA of VF-1 escorts Soviet TU-16 bombers © CJ HEATLEY / PLANETX.COM





Off Vietnam aboard *Ranger*.
 Our mission was to keep
 the EP-3 safe while scanning the coast.
 Word comes to launch alert.
 Two bogies are inbound – they split.
 Cowboy and Hoss take the guy heading
 for the P-3 and we take the other guy,
 who seems headed for the ship.
 We get into a little rolling scissors
 with this gomer about 70 miles out.
 I'm concerned because I have full fuel.
 It's a Flogger K, and he apparently wants
 to drag us inside the 12-mile limit.
 We try a join-up for some photos, but
 he clearly doesn't want that to happen
 – from burner to idle, boards out,
 breaking into us.
 We keep playing this guy,
 because we really want photos.
 Also we know he'll soon be out of gas.
 Eventually we get alongside, straight and
 level, for ten seconds – really close.
 This Flogger driver was a
 good six three and 200 pounds,
 with a huge relief pitcher mustache.
 Mask to one side and red hair
 sticking out under a leather helmet –
 pretty cool.
 Not very Occidental-looking,
 that's for sure.

JON "HOOTER" SCHRIEBER



F-14 of VF-103 with Croatian MiG-21 © DANA POTTS / PLANEPHOTO.COM



Here we all spent decades chasing these guys around, and now we're flying photo hops together.
 The MiG-21 is a beautiful jet, and the Croatians keep theirs in magnificent condition.

DANA "SMUDGE" POTTS



PERSIAN CATS

Iran bought 80 Tomcats, and I was one of the first instructors. The whole thing was pretty sporting, believe me. They had every level of pilot you can imagine – some as good as you've ever seen, and some complete hamburgers. For the most part the pilots were way better than the RIOs. Iran took the whole Tomcat deal very seriously, and they required pilots to have 1000 hours in Phantoms or F-5s. Trouble was the boys used a lot of creative log book work, and also some politics snuck into the process. Still the guys did OK, and when it came time to get it on with Iraq, they did some righteous damage through the 1980s. It was the most seriously sustained combat the jet ever got to experience.

GENE "MULE" HOLMBERG



IAF Warpaint © TONY WOREY / PLANEFIX.COM



Fighter F-14 © TONY WOREY / PLANEFIX.COM



Dan "Chopper" Chopp was delivering a new F-14A to Iran, complete with Iranian FNG up front.

Dan tells the pilot the Tomcat is so smart, it knows the pilot's name.

Disbelief, of course, from our FNG ally.

Dan writes the guy's name on the TID and stifles his laughter as the guy's name shows up mystically on his HSD.

As the ferry flight winds up and the jet pulls off the main runway to park, a grounding signals a stop on the taxiway.

The jet is approached by a guy carrying a live baby goat and a large knife.

The animal's throat is slit and its blood is poured all over the nose gear.

Welcome to Iran, fellas.

CHRIS "GEYSER" ANDERSEN



In the war against the Iraqi aggression we were determined to use our Tomcats to their maximum advantage. With few exceptions our aircraft never flew over enemy soil. We often launched a single jet to a high altitude where it could use its excellent radar for early warning of invading aircraft. Only our best RIOs were given that mission. There were a great many air-to-air engagements, and I personally fired a number of Phoenix missiles. This missile worked perfectly in my experience. On one occasion my wingman fired a Phoenix at a pair of MiG-23s in very tight formation. We believe the missile flew between the two jets, because its explosion destroyed both. Two MiGs with a single shot.

MOHAMMED FADAVAR





F-14A Tomcat of VX-9 with Phoenix and Sidewinder missiles © GEORGE HALL / PLANETPIX.COM



We revolutionized
guns instruction when
I taught at the RAG.

We started with
gun cameras.
They're the only
way to see where
you're going wrong.
We then started
shooting tracers,
which also helped.
And we tipped the
rounds with different
paint colors, for
scoring on the banner.
I also recorded perfect
gun runs in the 2E6
simulator, so pilots
could sit in there
and feel the controls
while they watched
ideal gun passes.

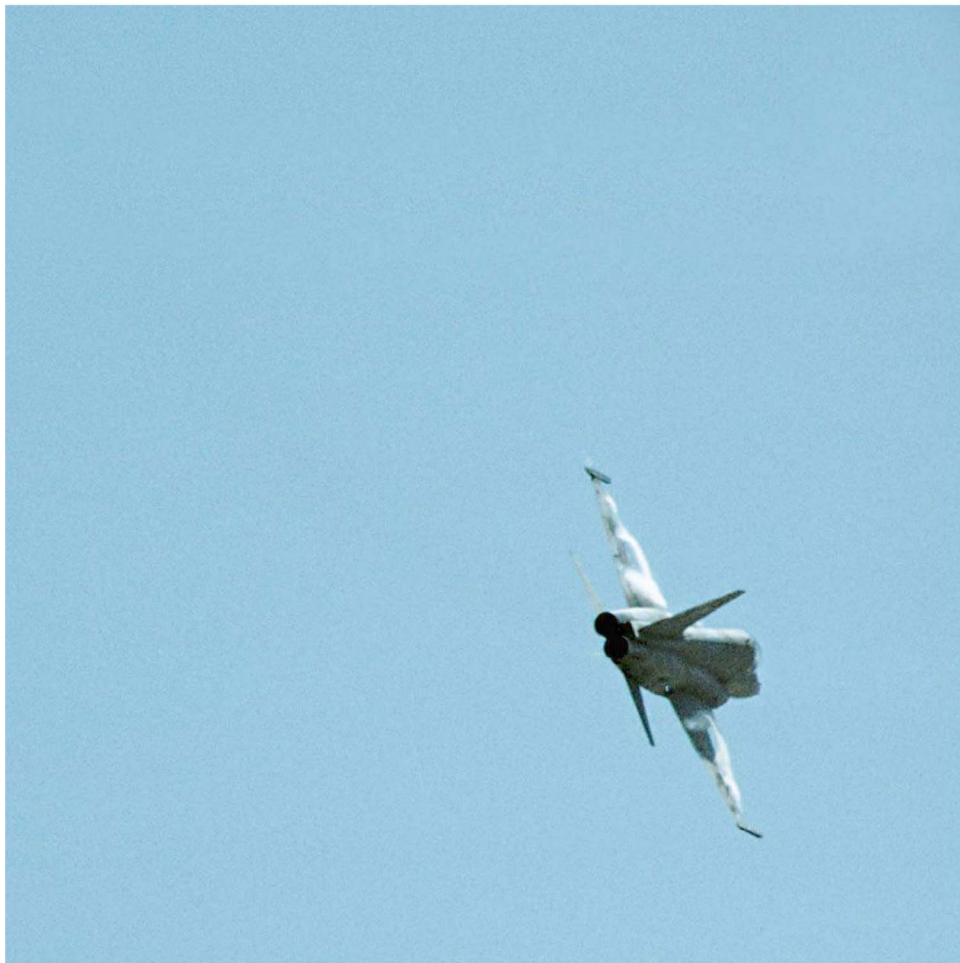
Shooting scores
went through the roof.

JOE "HOSER" SATRAPA



Fights on, pal © GEORGE HALL / FLANERX.COM





Hawk Smith
jumped me good once, over
at Yuma.
He was in one of those
early TOPGUNT-38s.

All of a sudden
it's "Guns on Hoser!"

At "guns" I yanked that poor
Tomcat into a break that
topped out at 12 Gs.

My RIO, Bill "Hillbilly" Hill,
had his head down a bit, and
it wound up
around his ankles.
If there had been
a control stick in the back
it would have killed him.

Grumman checked that bird
over when we recovered.
Not a hair out of place.
What a cast-iron machine.

JOE "HOSER" SATRAPA





080

VF-213 F-4A climbs with TOPGUN F-16N © BOB LAWSON / PLANETX.COM



F-4 TOPGUN flights on © TED CARLSON / PLANETX.COM

PRO

I doubted the Tomcat's abilities for a long time. Then I flew a hop with an AIM/ACE guy named Dave "Bush" Bjerke.

That first ride on his wing was unbelievable.

Bush with Cowboy, Loco with Shooter:

We proceeded to go at it, 2V6 with Reserve Phantoms.

I got one and was prosecuting number two when Bush slid in front of me.

By this time he'd shot four himself.

I said "Bush, if you don't get outta my way I'm gonna shoot you first."

He replied, "Okie Dokey" as he calmly finished off the last bogey.

I had never seen the 'Cat flown like that.

More than any single engagement that ride with Bush was an awakening, an epiphany.

I realized the true meaning of the old saying,

It's a poor craftsman who blames his tools.

CHIP "LOCO" McNEES



CON

You could fly the snot out of the F-14, if you bent some rules. Any aggressive move you wanted to make, you had to worry about how those TF30s would like it – you had to ask their permission.

When you fly a 1V1 against some guy who's never fought the Tomcat before, you can really mess with his head. You come straight into the merge with your wings all the way back but with real slow airspeed.

When the guy spots you at two miles, he's going to get all amped up, and he's going to think, OK, Tomcat, wings aft, speed of heat. He rockets past and pulls vertical to convert on you. You calmly go vertical behind him, select Zone V, and shoot him in the ass. Of course it'll only work once, assuming the guy has a brain in his head.

HANK "BUTCH" THOMPSON





We ingressed at low altitude
and executed the Hornet pop from the deck to 27k.
On the way up, my new B-model remained in locked combat spread,
mil power, while our strike lead in his F/A-18C required full burner
to make the climb to our 27,000-foot roll-in point.
After the ordnance delivery we both bugged out on the deck
toward the supersonic corridor at .95 Mach,
the lead again in full burner – double bubble tanks –
and our B at or below military rated thrust.
In the corridor I stroked the burners on the GE F-110s
and was pressed into my seat as if I were on the catapult.
In what seemed like no time we were passing 1.35.
At the Knock It Off we were three miles ahead of our Hornet
and still carrying more gas than he had launched with.

In the debrief we learned that we had both been shot at
by SA-3 missiles just as we reached the supersonic corridor.
In shock and awe,
the assembled strike participants watched with mouths open
as a little coffin appeared around the strike lead's Hornet,
while "our" simulated missile ran out of gas
before catching the screaming 'Cat!
There was a resounding cheer – from the Turkey side of the room.

The Israelis say *Speed Is Life*.

If so, flying the big-engine Tomcat was *A Wonderful Life*.

MARK "MONK" BATHRICK



F-14 and F-16N © BOB LAWSON / PLANETRX.COM





When flying as an Adversary, I'd always enjoy seeing the Turkey well flown. For a huge machine it could move unnaturally well in good hands. But learning how was somewhat hazardous — I remember attempting the cookbook rudder reversal procedures that were in the TOPGUN manual in the late '80s — and very nearly flat-spinning the A, complete with tones and compressor stalls.

No one could move the beast like Snort, though — I recall watching from the edge of the 500-foot bubble as both our jets became ballistic at 12,000 feet in W-72. Somehow Dale managed to pirouette and point at me while ballistic. That's when I realized that my suspicions about airborne maneuvering via split engine power were valid. I later used that tactic in dire circumstances against the Viper or Hornet. It was always a crowd pleaser.

JOHN "STASH" FRISTACHI





In the Gulf the most common big-wing tanker was the KC-135.
It's an Air Force bird, and they did a fantastic job for us.
But they have to reconfigure it on the ground, with a hose basket,
to deal with the Navy's probe and drogue system.

We were calling it The Iron Maiden
because of the way that big basket could
whip around and hurt you.

It had a lot of energy,
and there were damaged Tomcats all over the place.

We started flying with the probe doors removed,
after one got torn off.

If that thing came loose and happened to go down the right intake,
you'd not just lose an engine.
You'd be on fire.

MARK "CYRUS" VANCE





KC-10 refuels Navy jets over southern Iraq © DAVE BARANIK / PLANETPIX.COM



BINGO!

I was the oldest RAG instructor. I think I was older than the skipper. They gave me all the problem children – let Dad straighten 'em out. Same thing in the squadron.

Once on cruise I took up a kid who was having trouble coming aboard. The CO wanted his grades up, so we were scheduled for some bouncing. First cat shot and we shear the right main mount.

The skipper came right up and said, *No barrier*. He didn't want to damage the jet, which we were about to do anyway. So we got rid of some fuel while we got ready to land. At 2000 feet I tell the nugget to put out the refuelling probe.

He ignored me. I tell him a couple more times. He finally yelled, *Why are you telling me to put out the probe?* I said, *just try it*. He immediately says, *Marbles, it doesn't work*. I said, *Of course it doesn't. We lost right side hydraulics.*

We're a thousand miles at sea, and we can't get gas. So focus on landing us in one piece. For a hamburger he did pretty good, as I recall. Walked away with a 300-foot gouge in the deck. The jet didn't fly until we could crane it off.

JESS "MARBLIES" PARNELL

On a trip out of Rota back to the states, we waited a bit long to tank from our KC-135, and as soon as we put out the probe the right engine flamed out. We couldn't keep up with the tanker at that altitude. So we dropped back, got a restart, and zoomed up. By now we're genuinely low on gas, and we're in the middle of the Atlantic. Probe comes out, boom, engine stalls again. As we fell back to restart, we asked the tanker guys to slow it way down for the refuelling. This time we got our gas OK. Next two tanks we went through the same slow-down drill. The tanker pilot was a bit alarmed, and he asked us where we'd like to divert to.

We said, "Oceana, pal!"

I'm sure they're still talking about the crazy Tomcat guys with serious get-home-itis.

RICK "CREATURE" CREANGE



A twelve-plane F-14 squadron tailing from a pair of KC-135As © JEFF TWOMEY / PLANETPIX.COM



HARD START

When I was at VF-101 and Moon Vance was the skipper we hosted the SecNav, John Lehman. This was a guy who led from the front and who enjoyed the trenches. He was also a combat-hardened A-6 guy. I took him up on three Tomcat fights, all recorded on the TACTS.

It was the beginning of Hoser's reincarnation.

We had two very loud and violent compressor stalls – not self-induced, I swear.

Two immediate relights
and no need to relinquish position
or call a knock it off.

Me to SecNav on the ICS:

"Ya see, Mr. Secretary, this is the kind of bullshit we have to deal with every day with these TF30s."

I like to think the B/D
and the General Electric engines
came out of this visit.

JOE "HOSER" SATRAPA





Tomcat afterburner © TYSON KININGER / PLANETX.COM





I have the two things I've always wanted most in my life: I'm a Navy fighter pilot, and I own a junkyard.

MONROE "HAWK" SMITH in frustrated response to a network television interviewer's question on how it felt to be given command of a squadron of Tomcats





I wasn't *disparaging* the airplane.
I *loved* the airplane.
The Tomcat was
the finest ride I ever had.

I was taking a calculated dig
at the desperate
supply problems
of the day.
We had half
the Tomcats in the fleet
sitting with bare firewalls
at one point.

I knew I was
sticking my neck out,
network TV and all,
but I wanted to get the word
to people in Congress
who could do something
to help us out.

And it worked.

Although
that kind of
mouthing off
definitely
kept me away
from flag rank.

MONROE "HAWK" SMITH



Monroe Smith
will be a beacon for JOs
into yet another century.
Hawk likes to say,
"I am living proof
that you can survive
seven JAG investigations
and still make O-6."

BARRETT "SHOOTER" TILLMAN



F-14D of VF-31 © KATSUHIKO TOKUNAGA / PLANEPX.COM



The Tom deserved better than the TF30 – they should court-martial those who said it'd be good enough. I never got to fly the B or the D – but the A did have a fine top end at altitude. Best was a Rukowski path with a .5G bunt around 30k to unload the jet and get through transonic, continue the climb at around 1.2, level off as near the tropopause as you could and let her fly. You could feel the acceleration come in with glove vane extension at 1.35. Maybe another two minutes to hit placard, 1.88 – beyond if you dared! I think the 1.88 limit was for directional stability with an engine out. Lose a motor at that speed and the rudders and SAS would be overwhelmed. You'd lose the jet, perhaps catastrophically.

JOHN "MASHER" CARRIER



When I was skipper of the Black Knights, I was returning to Atsugi from South Korea with Nub Sanderlin up front. We stopped at Iwakuni for gas, then couldn't get the right engine to start. I called our maintenance on the phone, and they said it was an electrical problem. I had to open the inboard daily door; find this silver box gadget, and then push in the wire bundle while Nub cranked. I had visions of being Wile E. Coyote, burned to a cinder and looking stupid. But it was this or stay stranded at Iwakuni. The jet started OK, but now the trick was getting the door closed, a notorious problem on the old Toms. A Japanese maintainer was watching me all the while. The door wouldn't close, of course. This hard-charging American lay on his back and started kicking the door with both boots. You should have seen the color drain from this Japanese guy's face. Their jets are all clean enough to eat off. A guy pulling a stunt like this on a Japanese F-15 would have to commit hara-kiri. We affectionately called our Tomcats "Sky Harleys" – a bit rough around the edges. The door finally closed, and we cleared out of there for home.

DANA "SMUDGE" POTTS





F-14 of VF-31 entering axial for landing © FORTYTWOMET / PLANEPX.COM





The maintainers worked their asses off on cruise, doing the impossible every day – the camaraderie was awesome to behold.

Then you'd get to work as a checker.

Kneeling down next to the ass end of a Tomcat, thumbs up, your insides vibrating into goo, watching Zone V burner launches off the bow cats.

You suddenly knew what it was all about, what you were there for – it still gives me chills.

WALT WINTERS





F-14 on deck © TONY TWOHEY / PLANETPIX.COM



560



Ground-taxi demo for the squadron wives.
Suit 'em up in full gear and stick 'em in back.
Run it up in mil, light the pipes, go to about 100 knots and shut her down.
Come back to the ramp, remove spousal unit A, insert spousal unit B.
Repeat procedure until mission accomplished.
Great for family morale.
The skipper thought it was a terrible idea,
but he was reluctantly talked into it by an enterprising department head.
Everything went reasonably well until about the fourth evolution.

All of a sudden there were
two jets, three jets, four jets, five jets
hobbling around on blown tires.
No one thought to tell the jets
that these weren't real high-speed aborts they were enduring.
The cleverly designed blowout plugs were working perfectly.

Chaos in maintenance, what with all hands changing tires and towing airplanes.
The skipper helping out, trying to forestall disaster before anyone notices.

Master Chief: *Skipper, Admiral's on the phone.*
He'd like you to stop by and explain to him WHY HIS MASTER JET BASE IS CLOSED.

It was a good day to be a very junior officer,
watching the boss drag his bright-idea department head with him
to enjoy a good old-fashioned Navy ass-chewing.

But hey -- Tomcats and women!

Can't be all bad, Baby...!

PAUL "POMP" POMPIER





F-16 © TYSON RININGER / PLANETX.COM



We served with hundreds of Tomcat maintenance warriors.
Plane captains, ordies, troubleshooters –
young kids who proudly and expertly prepped our Tomcats.
Yellow shirts guided us, grapes refuelled us,
green cat crews launched us,
LSOs brought us down onto black, pitching decks.
Crewmen worked until they could barely stand.
Shipmates spilled their blood on the world's troubled waters.
They witnessed sunsets on a thousand lonely and distant lands.
They reflected our diverse origins.
They were the embodiment of American courage and dedication.
Their forebears went by other names:
Minutemen, Buffalo Soldiers, Rough Riders, Doughboys, GIs,
Grunts.
Patriots.
The kids answered the call to fight our nation's battles.
They flourished in the twilight struggles of the Cold War.
They showed what they were capable of in Desert Storm
and in the continuing Global War On Terror.
And each did his or her duty with pride and honor:

SCOTT "STEWIE" STEWART

Lots of people have mentioned it over the years,
but it's still awesome to me –
the fact that an aircraft carrier is basically staffed with teenagers.
The kids do a fantastic job of working the
most complex machine man has ever devised.
I'm not sure I had it together at 19 the way these young people do.

BOB "SUNDANCE" DAVIS





VF-302 F-35 burner cat shot © GEORGE HALL / PLANETPIX.COM



Q&A

What do the Plane Captain's hand signals mean?

Aircraft is being final-checked in the hold short area.
Right hand on head means "hands visible and out of cockpit."
Left hand is pointing to a final safety checker under the rear of the A/C.

Q&A

What do these signals indicate?

If you don't know, shut off your engines and please step away from the vehicle.



Takeoff © BOB LAWSON / PLANEPIX.COM



I had a helluva good time on **TOP GUN**. Especially the aerial stuff. Now Cruise, he got so stoked he went out and got his pilot's license. I enjoyed it, but I didn't go that far.

Most of the actors were taken up for at least one Tomcat ride. Me, I flew a half dozen times.

They mounted cameras so they could film me looking over my shoulder as the bad guys went by – the Navy guys called it "Doing the Linda Blair." Although I can't really twist my head all the way around.

We tried shooting it in the fake cockpits on the set, but it looked lame. Not surprising.

On one flight, we're sitting on the cement in front of TOPGUN with the engines running. Everybody else has already gone out to the runway. We have something wrong. There's this crew guy on the ground, shaking his head and going thumbs down. Very disturbing to me.

My pilot, Bozo, says on the intercom, "Goose, reach back behind your seat on the left. There's a bunch of circuit breakers. Find the one that's sticking out and push it in."

I feel all around. Nothing sticking out.

So Bozo says, "There's more on the right side. Try them."

Sure enough, one is sticking out about a half inch. I hold my breath and push it in. Just in case it fires the ejection seat or something. Right away the ground guy is smiling and giving us a thumbs up. He signals us to roll, salutes, and we're outta there.

I'm thinking – wait a minute – I, a Hollywood actor; just fixed a \$30 million fighter plane. Not very reassuring.

ANTHONY "GOOSE" EDWARDS, AS TOLD TO DAVE "BIO" BARANEK





NINE LIVES



THE MARTIN-BAKER CLUB

If it says Pratt & Whitney
on the engines,
it damn well better say
Martin-Baker on the seats.

JOE "HOSER" SATRAPA

*Groucho Marx said something about
not wanting to become a member
of any club that would let him in.
The Martin-Baker Club is an outfit
that no one wants to join, period.*

*Ejections are like old age – no fun and not for
sissies, but clearly preferable to the alternative.
The Tomcat's original GRU-7 seat along with the
more modern MB-14 NACES seat have given
over a hundred naval aviators the let-down.*





I'll set the scene.
Midnight trap, Indian Ocean.
I'm manning the spare with the skipper:
We weren't scheduled to fly that night at all.

It proves to be a bad night to catch the
4-wire.
The kid setting the tension
is asleep on his feet.
Literally, as it turns out.
He's got the cable set for a much lighter jet.
We pull the wire out at both ends,
and we stumble off the waist
at maybe 50 knots, dragging this damn wire.

The skipper and the Air Boss
are both yelling to get out.
From Striker I hear the three most
important words anyone has ever said to me:
EJECT, EJECT, EJECT.

We're looking up at the deck,
I remember that.
And I remember that it seems to take a
hell of a long time for the sequence to start.
Really it was the usual half second, but that
thing about time slowing down is true.

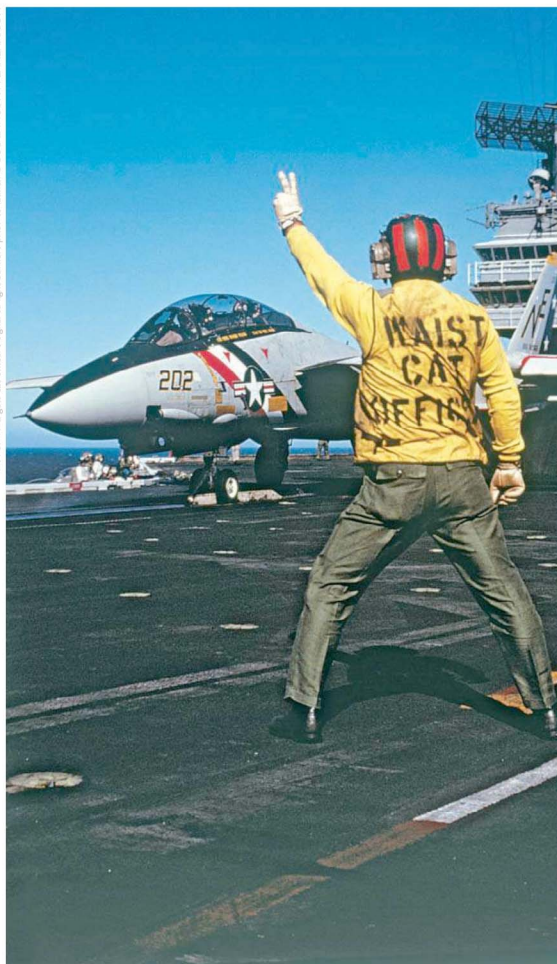
I get about a half swing of the chute.
At least the water was real warm,
and like glass.

DAVE "BIO" BARANEK



F-4 © BOB LAWSON / PLANETPIX.COM





I was on the port bow cat
with Tag Ostertag and
Spike Prendergast
ready to go on the right.
They launch, and the shuttle
fails halfway down the stroke.
The jet limps off the bow
and sinks from sight.
Just then the bow raises in the
waves, and all we see is the glow
of the seat rockets and two chutes.
But wait a minute – here comes the
Tomcat, vertical in Zone V burner
like the space shuttle.

Pull that thousand pounds
out of the nose and watch out.
The thing gets to about 2000 feet,
flops over on its back, and next
thing it's headed straight at us.

We're strapped in
and waiting to die.
I'm being converted on by a
kamikaze Tomcat,
and I haven't even gone flying yet.
It hit right alongside us, in the water:
We got splashed with sea water
on the canopy.

My God,
the stuff we laugh about now.

MONROE "HAWK" SMITH

I missed the fireworks.
I was too busy trying to live.
We assumed it was a cold cat,
and we knew
we couldn't fly it out,
although we tried
for a few moments.
Tag and I both fell
into the bow wave.
He spit out one side
and I on the other;
wrapped in the chute
like a Persian rug.
I'm not sure how I got loose.

Crazy what we can
laugh about now.

Not funny at the time,
believe me.

TOM "SPIKE" PRENDERGAST



F-16 © KATSUHIKO TOKUNAGA / PLANETX.COM





A testimonial to the strength and resilience of the Tomcat as well as our aviators was the day "Reb" Edwards and "Grundy" Grundmeier launched with us on the first day of Gulf ops in 1991.

We each had quick check flights, and we then proceeded to bump heads after our Pro-Cs. At the merge Grundy and Reb disappeared into the haze, and I couldn't get them on the radio. After raising the ship I found out they were landing on Ike after a NORDO pass and several practice approaches.

When I rendezvoused I saw that the nose of their jet was missing. They flew a I-wire.

On landing we got the whole gruesome story. The radome had separated, smashing holes in the windscreen and canopy.

Grundy has numerous facial cuts and one eye inoperative. Reb was semiconscious with a broken collarbone and a huge chunk of Plex embedded in his left eye.

Reb made it back to a landing with one good eye, a hole big enough to see out of – and the wind blast that went with it – ILS needles on the inside of the center windscreen, and Grundy's help with voiceless nav.

CAG Jim "Lord" Sherlock called it the most incredible feat of airmanship he had ever seen, including combat.

Both were awarded the DFC.

The jet recovered to fly again, as did Reb and Grundy. Reb became an astronaut and shuttle pilot on Flight STS-89.

DICK "WEASEL" GALLAGHER



F-4s on cat © J HEATLEY / PLANEPX.COM



F-4 cat shot © PETE CLAYTON / PLANEPX.COM





As they say, there I was, 30,000 feet and the speed of heat.
 With four Gs in the pull I took the radome and windscreen full in the face.
 I didn't have real SA on the disaster until much later – just figured we had hit something.
 The aluminum pitot tube came in and broke my collarbone as well as collapsing a lung.
 The center mirror detached and removed my mask.
 Bits of blood and flesh coming off my face, no mask – meaning no comm.
 More bits of Plex breaking off and peppering me – it was like a bad movie.
 Throttles to idle, speed brakes, tight spiral for max descent.
 I used my one good eye to look at Grundy in the mirror:
 He was slumped and motionless.
 I didn't know it at the time, but at this moment I was the luckiest pilot on the planet.
 I had more time in the F-14 with GE engines than anyone alive – I had been a test pilot on the B.
 As I got slow in thicker air I looked at myself in the mirror:
 One eye appeared to be a total loss.
 I figured I was done with Navy flying, so I determined to make a landing that would be a last hurrah.
 Grundy was in bad shape, so a 150-mile run to the beach was out of the question.
 And with my various injuries I couldn't change the TACAN.
 The plane flew pretty well, although the key instruments were unusable.
 I flew a no-radio pass down the side of Ike,
 then used the next ten minutes to get in two practice approaches.
 I rolled in on centerline for the final pass.
 I had to lean my head to the left to sight through the windscreen hole.
 All the other glass was opaque and spider-webbed.
 I was sure it was my last flight in an airplane's cockpit.
 I was never more relieved when I felt the tug of the number one arresting cable.
 It cost something like \$120,000 to fix the jet, and way more than that to fix me and Grundy.
 But I came back with near-perfect vision, a miracle, and I went on to fly the shuttle for NASA.

It's occurred to me many times that despite various accolades I was just doing my Tomcat pilot thing.
 I was just as good a pilot five minutes before it happened as I was five minutes after I trapped.

JOE “REB” EDWARDS





I once walked into the famous Miramar
Wednesday happy hour and saw a mixture
of old sticks along with a half dozen of my students.

They were all laughing their asses off,
telling one another about their various
brushes with death in the Tomcat.

Just as I was about to join them, they came
to the realization that they all involved Darth
in the back seat at the moment of truth!

Serious common denominator!

They let out a roar, and proceeded to run through
all the horror stories again for my benefit.

I pointed out to them that cheating death
and dying are two different animals.

Then they felt bad and bought me cocktails all night.

DAN "DARTH" CAIN



You sit for hundreds of hours on all that gear, and you always wonder if it's going to work.
Then I punch out of an old jet that just plain quits.
The whole thing is surreal.

I look up to check the chute, and everything looks good.
My mask is gone, along with a piece of my face, so I'm bleeding.
The sky is full of paper, like big confetti — all the charts and manuals.
I see the jet spin down and hit the ocean, like in a World War II movie.
Weasel looks OK in his chute, maybe a hundred yards away.
I drop the seat pack, and I land right in the raft as it's inflating.
I barely even get wet.

Pretty shit-hot, when everything works perfectly.

Right away I get our F/A-18 adversary on the radio.

He figured out what happened, even though we never got a word out on the air.

He came right to us and made a low pass.

Pretty good work for a Marine.

We were a hundred miles from the beach, so there was a long, cold wait for the helo.

But believe me, I'm not complaining.

It all could have been so much worse.

I get picked up by the newest helo in the Navy.

They've had it about two days.

I get to be its first hoist.

The new cable is wound so that we spin like crazy on the way up.

Now for the first time I'm feeling, sick, plus I'm exhausted and probably hypothermic.

The kid who got in the water with me says, "Sir, can I have your TOPGUN patch?"

You're supposed to guard that patch with your life,

but I say "Sure, pal, take it."

I never bothered to get another one.

Weasel still calls me every Ejection Day, wherever he is in the world.

It's always "Hey, Tumor; how you hangin'?"

Like in the parachute.

TOM "TUMOR" TWOMEY





F-14 on waist cot at dusk © TONY TWOHIEY / PLANETPIX.COM





We had a night hop in the North Atlantic,
complete with dry suits and the worst
weather forecast I had ever witnessed.
I was in the back seat
with Geno Miller driving.
Horizontal rain as we stepped.
We fired up the jet,
secretly hoping for a problem.
It was perfect, 4.0.
Geno pointed out the extreme deck pitch.
My reply, which didn't help, was
It doesn't matter,
when we get back it will be so dark that
we won't be able to see the deck moving.
Then I shut up.
We lined up on the bow cats next to an A-7.
We wondered,
Is anyone upstairs
aware of this situation?
Then I saw something I happily have never
seen before or since.
A huge wave blew across the bow
and the A-7, just before its shot,
completely disappeared from view.
We both blurted,
Did you _____ing see that?
The Air Boss came up and said,
Shut 'em down, boys — we're not flying tonight.
Like the wine steward says,
Excellent decision, Sir.

BRIAN "DONGER" GAWNE



Weight board showing 36K pounds for F-14 cat shot © J. HEALLEY / PLANETX.COM



F-14 © TYSON RININGER / PLANETX.COM





You wouldn't believe the fantastic fixes that arose from our ejection.

First off, end of runway lights – I think I could have braked the jet
if I had known how much room I did or didn't have.

The broken shuttle was completely redesigned, of course.

The final cat checker turned out to have terrible night vision –
he never caught what was wrong with the hookup.

The helo swimmer got in the water with me,
and I really needed his help cutting the shrouds from my lower legs
because the chute was trying to drown me.

He had no knife with him.

I could have murdered somebody.

That never happened again.

That's where the horseshoe-shaped shroud cutter design came from.

It was hard to pull out a regular knife
without running the risk of cutting the LPA.

Seawater-activated fittings.

It goes on and on.

And then there we were, Spike and I, sitting in these ridiculous little
hot tubs while the doc gave us our shot of medicinal brandy.

Spike was jammed in there, naked, knees in his face.

I can still see him and squeeze a laugh out of the whole thing.

MARK "TAG" OSTERTAG



F-14As of VF-154 on Kitty Hawk deck © KATSUHIKO TOKUNAGA / PLANETPIX.COM



F-14s on deck of Independence © DAN BAYER / PLANETPIX.COM



A RIO teaching a pilot from the back seat isn't as strange as you might think.

If you keep it cool, and if the student is a good listener, it all works fine. After all, Navy pilots are all superb, and the Tomcat nuggets are the cream of the cream. You can dial the degree of difficulty up or down depending on how the kid is doing.

I only scared myself once that I can recall.

My pilot was too high and too far forward on his lead. We hit the merge and cranked it around to convert. All of a sudden we were pulling into lead's center line tank.

Very, very big jet in the canopy.

I was normally very quiet, but I'm screaming, "Unload, nose down, unload, nose down!"

Cheated death again.

BRYAN "CHUM" HERDLICK



I had to blow us out once when I was a RAG instructor. This kid was on his first ACM hop, and frankly he was terrified. He got us wrapped up, and over we went. More of an inverted spiral than a spin, but I still figured it was hopeless. Lost both engines on the way down and couldn't restart. The accident board chewed me up pretty good. I shoulda done this, I shoulda done that. Easy to say after the fact. I was pretty down, and I went to the club for a few cocktails. Monroe Smith sidled up, said, *C'mere, Marbles.* He dragged me out on the deck where the sunset was gorgeous. He said, *You see that fantastic sunset? It's going down, and it's going to come up again tomorrow. You're alive to enjoy it. Take it easy on yourself.* That's the kind of people we had flying Tomcats.

JESS "MARBLIES" PARNELL





This was one for the books.

Poor VF-213.
They were flying a senior officer,
surface warfare type,
giving him what's called
an incentive ride.
The jet unloads inverted,
lots of negative G,
and his lap belt isn't tight enough.
His head bangs on the roof
and he grabs you-know-what
to pull himself into the seat.
In the D it's between your legs.
Off he goes, right behind the canopy.

Imagine his surprise.

Fortunately the seats
are set to fire separately.

DANA "SMUDGE" POTTS



F-14 transonic vapor © TONY WONEY / PLANETX.COM





I apologize to this day for almost killing myself and Wizzard. He was a junior guy and I was CAG-14 LSO, so we didn't normally fly together. One day I was showing him some tricks, low-level over the water, maybe 250 knots on a nice VFR day. I trimmed the nose up and initiated a max-performance roll, whereupon the spoilers failed, the "Horizontal Tail Authority" light came on, and the "Roll SAS" light came on, too.

It was a challenge to keep from impacting the water. Closest to dying that I can recall.

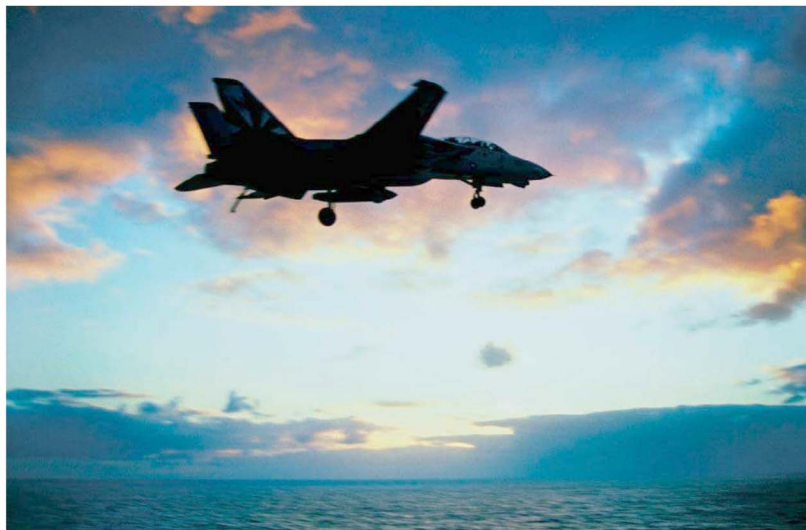
Wizzard was unconcerned at the time and he still insists it was no big deal. He continued to lead that way in the operational Navy. He's intense, keeps the pressure on, but manages to make it all look easy at the same time. He's one of my heroes, in the air and on the ground.

MONROE "HAWK" SMITH



I hung it out many a time, and I frightened myself more than once. I feel very fortunate that it all worked out OK. Once I landed with one engine that had been reduced to very hot junk and the other one motoring along at about thirty percent. We were in Vegas last month on vacation, and my son wanted to go skydiving. The tandem kind, where you're strapped to the guy's chest. I told him, no way. I sometimes feel like I've used up all the good luck in our family. I told him, make eighteen, move out and do whatever you want. Until then, the answer is no.

HANK "BUTCH" THOMPSON



P-40 landing on carrier © BOB LAWSON / PLANEPK.COM





BOMBCAT



SHARPENED CLAWS

I always loved
the bombing mission.

A lot of fighter guys
looked down on it,
thought it was beneath their
dignity or something.
But there is no satisfaction like
putting a green bomb on target.
You debrief a fight,
a 2V2, and it's
"Skipper, nice energy
management today.
RIO, your radio
work was good."
Big deal.

A bullseye with a 2,000-pound
bomb, that's something
to see.

Try debriefing that, Baby...!

MIKE "BEET" MCGARVEY



F-16D Bombscat dropping 2000-lb Mk 84s ©TOTTWONEY / PLANEPX.COM





F-14 Tomcat with bombs and LANTIRN pod © TED CARLSON / PLANEPYX.COM



CAG 8 went to sea in the late '90s with all the new gadgets on our A models – LANTIRN, digital TARPS,

night vision devices.

The two Tomcat squadrons, VF-14 and VF-41, each had half their jets configured.

This meant three different variants of the A on one deck. In terms of operational leadership the challenge was awesome – we were training people, and our maintainers were trying to deal with the extra demands on the jets with the new hardware.

The squadrons shared secrets and expertise in a way I had never experienced before. Tophatters and Black Aces flew each other's jets routinely. We even mixed and matched aircrews.

Cats and dogs living together: It was an E ticket ride in those early days of the post-Cold War period – the days when the Tomcat changed its stripes.

KEN "NUBS" NEUBAUER



A small group of dedicated Bombcatters made everything happen in a miraculously short time span.

We got thumbs up from several key flags, and Martin Marietta kicked in with internal funding for the demo. The first tests in 1995 were totally successful.

The first squadron, VF-103, deployed with LANTIRN in 1996, and in another year everyone had it.

The system performed even better than our F-15E benchmark, due to superior displays and controls in our version.

The key figures of this renegade team deserve an at-taboy, if I do say so myself.

So raise one for Dave "Hey Joe" Parsons, Jim "Ruff" Ruliffson, Monty "Python" Watson, and yours truly. New claws, Baby!...

DAN "MICROSHARK" FISCHOFF



I remember briefing the fine Pentagon leadership on our ongoing attempts to bring Tomcat strike up to speed. One Admiral said, and I quote, "It's a bastard program and always will be."

Light-attack guy, as I recall. Off we went with no funding, borrowing BRU-32 bomb racks from unsuspecting Hornet friends.

Next thing you know we had a fleet clearance for Mk-80 series weapons. Enter "Velcro" Riera and Admiral Allen, plus completion of the LANTIRN integration. Believe it or not, the flags were still using that B-word. Wonder what those retired duffers are thinking these days, now that the Bastard Bombcat program has morphed into the finest striker the Navy has ever owned?

ROBERT "NAVAIR" OLSEN



Navy F-14 FAC(A) crews were a tremendous boon to Special Operations.

An F-14 with LANTIRN, and a FAC(A)-trained crew, was a major force multiplier for Spec Ops.

They could do it all, from controlling fixed or rotary-wing air support to calling in sea and shore-based artillery.

I would always tell the Army Special Forces and SEAL teams to request a Navy F-14 FAC(A) for serious support in combat operations.

ANDY "SENIOR" NELSON

We had F-14 RIOs doing righteous FAC work on the ground. They were in high demand – and, of course, they specialized in bringing the Tomcat to the party.

ANONYMOUS SEAL





F-4D of VF-213 © KATSUHIKO TOKUNAGA / PLANETX.COM



I was privileged to play a part in the great LAN-TIRN integration caper. It should stand as a model for this kind of development in the future. But it won't. You know why? Of course you do. Too many people, and too many little empires, were sidestepped in the process. Bureaucracies hate a successful end run. And my God, the money we spent – or didn't. You almost could have put the entire deal on a MasterCard.

DAVE “HEY JOE” PARSONS



As a MAWTS student I often heard Alfred Cunningham, the Father of Marine Corps Aviation, quoted, to wit: “The only excuse for aviation in any service is its usefulness in assisting troops on the ground to achieve their objectives.” Later as a Forward Air Controller (Airborne) instructor I quoted him a lot myself. The Navy’s FAC(A) program sprang from the initiative of a few Tomcat JOs in a feat of tremendous audacity and vision. You can imagine the battle for acceptance in the early days – much like TARPS. The few were fighting off legions of “not a pound for air-to-ground” cold warrior skeptics, many of them squadron and air wing commanders. But the clouds of doubt were swept away in the skies over Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq, where these specially trained Tomcat crews plied their trade with skill and professionalism.

JJ “TROLL” PATTERSON



F-14 Tomcat © KATSUHIKO TOKUNAGA / PLANETPIX.COM





We flew the first night of OIF in 2003 – we had to launch from the ship in the southern Med, fly across Egypt, down to the Red Sea, over the Gulf of Aqaba, and up through Saudi Arabia to hit targets around Baghdad. Back out the way.

We're stumbling out over Saudi, everybody's low on gas, and the tanker control reports that our filling stations are going to be a bit late.

We ask, *How late?*

About an hour, they reply.

I'm the CAG, so it's up to me to throw some weight around. Which I apparently did, because they showed up pretty quick.

There was some serious guzzling going on.

I think our flight was 26 aircraft.

That hour delay would have been catastrophic.

The hop clocked in at a shade under nine hours.

I never want to do that again.

MARK "CYRUS" VANCE



The Tomcat with LANTIRN is an awesome bomber: It's actually better than the F-15E, although my Air Force friends will beat me up. Really there's no comparison. We had that huge screen, and much better resolution. With the Strike Eagle you can put the bomb on the building. With the Tomcat you're putting the bomb into the third window from the left, from miles away.

JAY "SPOOK" YAKELEY



J. H. Dropp (JAWT) © TED CARLSON / JPLANEPIX.COM

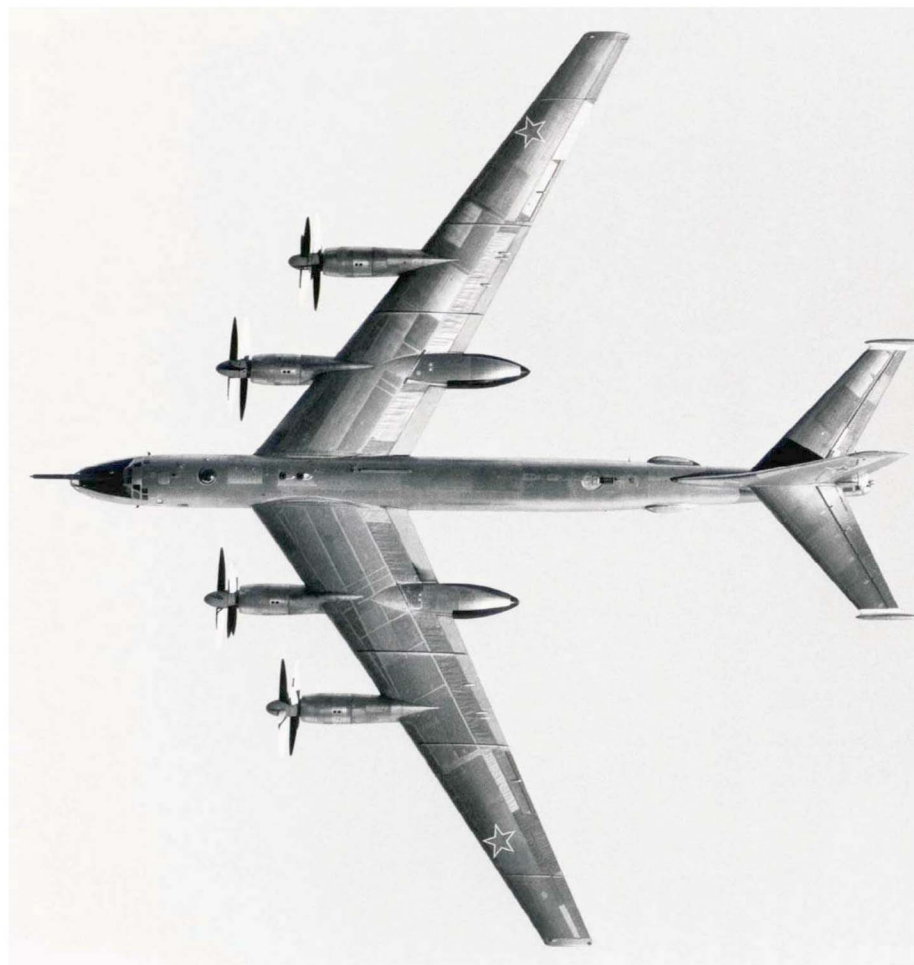




I had a great time with TARPS hops. A lot of guys shied away, like it was beneath them or something – but TARPS birds got a lot of no-shit combat rides into Indian Country. Since I took pictures anyway, I'd use the thing as a great big camera. We maneuvered all around this Bear – you're not sure what the camera is catching, especially straight down. But we nailed him. The cameras have a huge film size, and the results are amazingly sharp.

One pass and haul ass, Baby...!

DAVE "HEY JOE" PARSONS





World Reconnaissance Air Meet at Bergstrom AFB.

The lone, and lonely, Navy competitor was a FITWING Tomcat armed with the mighty TARPS pod.

Most teams were RF-4 squadrons from the USAF, the Marines, and Germany.

Also Brit Jaguars and an Australian RF-111 team – in other words, all unarmed dedicated recon birds,

unlike the F-14, which was an air superiority fighter that just happened to carry a camera pod.

Part of the competition was lookout doctrine – F-15s would jump the competitors,

call out the visual, do a 90-degree turn to honor the threat, and continue.

The judges were befuddled when the Tomcat converted on the F-15 and shot him in the lips.

One Air Force general in the debrief, bless his heart, thought it was hilarious – his view was not widely shared.

BRIAN “DONGER” GAWNE



BEAR BAITING

We participated in an exercise in 1982 named Northern Wedding, where we had NATO forces acting as adversaries along with the harsh weather of the North Sea.

There was the likelihood of some real adversaries pitching into the fight; the Soviets weren't going to be happy with American carriers that close to their turf.

The Admiral was counting on a robust Soviet reaction, since he was whipping up the most provocative defense posture ever attempted with the Tomcat; he surmised the Soviet Bears would expect to encounter Tomcats at 200 miles from the carrier, making it simple for them to pinpoint the American ships.

The plan was to surprise the Russians by intercepting their Bears at the unheard-of distance of 1000 miles, under a mission code-named “Sly Fox.”

The package, consisting of Prowlers and tankers with the Toms, would fly under EMCON and keep their radars off,

letting the Prowler pinpoint the Bears.

At the intercept the supporting aircraft stripped off to let the F-14s slide up the Bears.

They were caught totally off-guard by the unexpected appearance of the American jets.

As the Toms camped on the wing, or tight by the rear gunner's blister, the Bears searched in vain over the cloud cover; trying to hunt down the carrier in thousands of square miles of stormy seas and confusing radar contacts.

Sly Fox birds worked under total EMCON – no talk, radar emissions, TACAN or datalinks.

Those Bears really had to labor to find the ship.

MIKE “RAZ” ARONEY







The Tomcat is a ridiculously good weapons platform. The best. The displays were perfect, and the LANTIRN was awesome. We were using it to send pictures in real time to the ground and back up again. My first night over Iraq, we get a request for a strike from some guy on the ground. This is the proverbial sergeant on horseback. He's all excited, and I'm nervous too. He says, *Sir, the target is 800 meters to my front, beyond this flat open area.* I come up and say, *Son, this whole goddam country is a flat open area. You gotta do better than that.*

MARK "CYRUS" VANCE



One of the really great things about being a CAG is that you get to check out in everything your air wing has. I'm a 20-year attack guy, A-7s and F/A-18s, and here I am flying the Tomcat. It's a terrific attack bird. The airplanes with LANTIRN and the super-sharp PTIDS displays simply cannot miss. For the first combat hop of my life I chose the D-model. This was over Afghanistan, and from then on I alternated every day between the Tomcat and the little Hornet. On that first mission we caught a MiG-21 spooling up on the runway, fully loaded. One perfect JDAM and he disappeared.

CHUCK "SNAPPER" WRIGHT

The Combatant Commander in theater is going to miss the Tomcat. The strike capability is simply devastating — size, speed, legs, power; ordnance load — the Turkey can really reach out and touch the bad guys.

WILL "COONDAWG" COONEY





There is so much to say about the last of the Grumman 'Cats. It was the successful follow-on to the failed attempt by McNamara's Whiz Kids to force the F-111 common platform down the Navy's throat. Cold War Fleet Air Defender from the Russian Bear; star of one of the most successful aviation movies ever; undefeated aerial combat veteran; badass airshow performer; pickup tactical recce asset. But the Tomcat's crowning moments came at the very end, when it morphed into the Bombscat.

The Navy leadership learned a lesson that escaped the Air Force after Desert Storm: aerial fighters with no bomb delivery capability were virtually worthless after the first few days of modern air combat. Used sporadically in the Bosnia/Kosovo campaigns, the Bombscat came into its own when this nation was attacked by terrorists using caves in Afghanistan as their hiding place.

The F-14s were soon delivering death and destruction onto those enemies of America.

Then later the F-14 was again reinvented as a land-based Special Forces direct support aircraft, earning vast respect from those operators. Whether as an interceptor; aerial fighter; recce platform or tactical striker, the F-14 was a resolute warrior and important national asset. It will be missed by all real flyers and warriors.

ED "OTTO" PERNOTTO





F-14A with 2000-lb iron bombs © TONY TWOHEY / PLANETPIX.COM



F-4 approaches carrier with Plasma Guard Figure © CJ HEATLEY / PLANEPX.COM





Ah, Qaddafi's Line of Death, Gulf of Sidra.
Those were the days.

On one of the daily presence missions I was flying with Flash Gordon.
We were paired with Mike Franklin and Beef Bailey on the wing.
We had been hanging around Cap Station One for maybe 30 minutes when
I detected two high-speed targets in Track While Scan mode.

They were coming up from the town of Sirt.
As I followed them through 60k at a good Mach 1.5, I was thinking Foxbat.
At that moment my pilot said, "Skipper; those aren't Foxbats."

We knew the Soviets had sent some SA-5 long-range missiles, and here they were.
We knew from our homework that the missiles were headed
for 100k-plus – then they'd pounce while unloading at maybe Mach 4.
We popped chaff and did a split-S to get under their horizon.

They passed overhead with no lock.

Turned out a hard-dick A-7 driver had taken out the guidance trailer with a HARM.
Not a word on this from anyone – E-2, Aegis ship, or our carrier.
Then the boat sent the code word: "Tabletop,"
which cleared us to engage any Libyan forces.

Of course, nobody came up to play.

They had learned the hard way they were no match for the Tomcat
and the world's best aviators who flew them.

"SPARKY" LYLE



I loved the Turkey, but it was the guys who flew them,
and the guys who turned them, that made it what it was:
America's Favorite Fighter – as Mad Al Myers would say.

Herewith some pretty memorable green ink:

Capping with Geno Miller on the night Mike Dowty
in a VA-34 Intruder sank the Libyan *La Combatante* with a Harpoon.
TARPS missions over Iraq and Bosnia, navigating with a hand-held Trimble GPS.
This simple gadget, available at Circuit City for a couple hundred bucks,
was more reliable than the antiquated F-14 INS.
So let's see: a \$50 million fighter and a critical recon mission
at the mercy of four AA batteries – which, of course,
died halfway through the mission, and there you are trying to swap them with-
out dropping one and fodding the cockpit.
By Kosovo and OEF we'd upgraded to the better Garmin unit,
wired into the jet's system – still dealing with Circuit City,
but no longer relying on that *Energizer Bunny*.
More green ink: first night over Afghanistan with Jaws Molpus –
we popped a MiG-21 in a bunker at Shindad Airfield.
As a JO I always dreamed of killing a MiG – just never thought
it would be with a GBU instead of Fox One Two Three.
On my 41st birthday: dropping four GBU's with Jaws Molpus and guiding
eight LMAVs from F/A-18s onto tanks and vehicles with our LANTIRN.
Capping with Mad Dog Copeland off Libya
a few weeks after the strikes in 1986.
Who better in the front seat than a CAG with a Vietnam MiG kill?
We could see the Libyans on radar but they wouldn't come feet wet.

BRIAN "DONGER" GAWNE





TOP CATS



MOVERS & SHAKERS

I was a VF-51 department head,
and I was flying an air show off the carrier.

Actually, we did it three days in a row.

CAG was in the back seat – Lyle “Ho Chi” Bien.

He wanted a supersonic pass, which we delivered,
two hundred feet off the water:

The Air Boss yelled something about broken glass everywhere.

The next day I said to CAG,
What about us breaking stuff?

He said,
If you DON'T break something, I'll find somebody who will.

There's a leader you'd follow anywhere.
One of my heroes.

PHIL “FILTHY” GRANDFIELD





Tomcat afterburner © J HEATLEY / PLANETPIX.COM



I was a new skipper; VF-154.
We had four jets landing in Guam.
The weather was the
worst I've ever seen.
TACAN approaches,
because the radar is intermittent.
It was me and
three other JOs flying.
I'm going last to make sure
these guys get down.
I'm seeing my command tour
pass before my eyes.
In this weather we could
easily lose a couple of jets.
Everybody does OK.
I touch the wheels and I still
can't see a thing to the front.
That's how bad it was.
I can see the sides of the runway,
and I know it's 14,000 feet long.

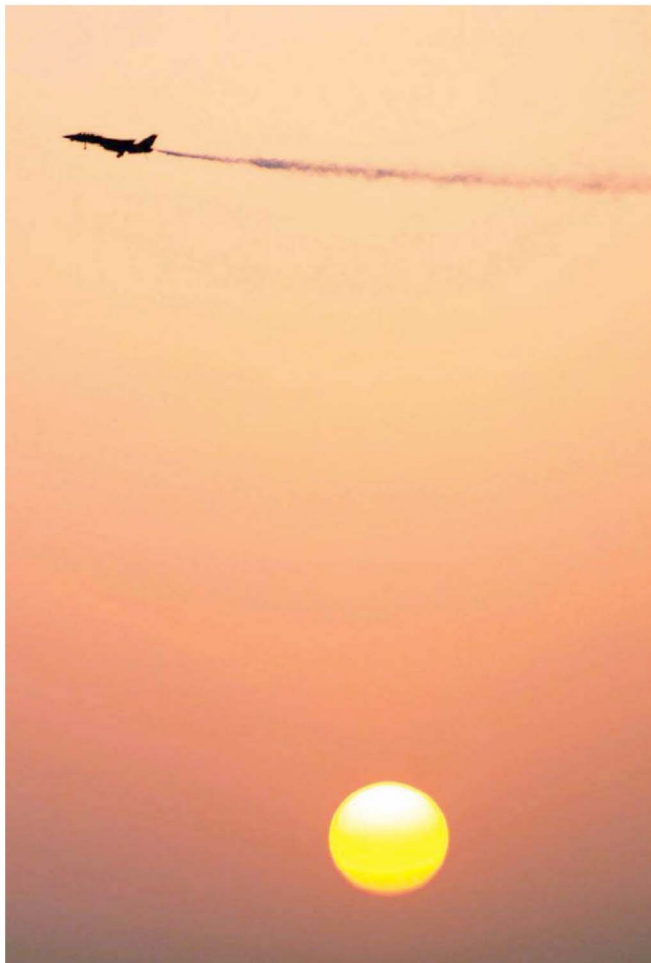
I was so proud of those guys.

PHIL "FILTHY" GRANDFIELD



F-14 night burner © DAVE BARANEK / PLANETRX.COM





EAGLE EATERS

I was the first ensign to complete day/night Tomcat quals, right out of flight school. I was rewarded with the privilege of picking up a brand-new Tomcat at the factory for delivery to the west coast. My dad was a longtime Grumman test pilot, and he handed me the keys, so to speak; I was never prouder of him or myself.

To make the flight truly historic we stuck another ensign in the RIO seat.

While Grumman churned the publicity machine we got busy planning the flight.

This was during the fuel crisis of 1973, and Luke AFB near Phoenix had just the day before lifted restrictions on transient fuel stops.

So Luke it was.

We'd let the Air Force get a close-up look at the Tom.

We were the first F-14 ever seen at that huge base.

A general came to greet us at the VIP parking ramp.

As we raised the canopy, I reminded my RIO to put on his cover so we could render proper salutes once down the ladder.

The general was speechless at the sight of two lowly ensigns making a cross-country Tomcat hop!

Luke was scheduled to receive its first F-15 Eagles the next day.

At that time no one under the rank of O-4 major had flown the Eagle. Let 'em get a load of a real fighter, Navy style!

The final flight over to Miramar was short, so we whacked the Air Force a final time with a sunset takeoff. Zone V burner to 20,000 feet and still over their runways! The departure controller watched in amazement and then asked our aircraft type.

My RIO responded, "We're an Eagle Eater, Baby...!"

What a great day to be an American!

DALE "SNORT" SNODGRASS





Green ink off Libya in 1980,
in the form of a 2V2 intercept of Libyan MiGs.
I still remember Quail Dantone making the "Master Arm" call
to our wingman "Critter" Saunders at 20 NM.

Damn, that launch button DOES light up!

GLEN "WHEELS" WHELESS

I first saw a Tomcat at a British air show in the mid-'70s.
On that day I determined I would somehow fly the bird.
Damned if I didn't wangle an exchange tour ten years later.

I had flown Phantoms in England and Germany,
so I was familiar with the two-crew concept.
But crew coordination in the Tomcat is much more refined.
There is a surprising amount of independence.
The pilot is the close-in guy: combat, formation, carrier landings.
The RIO sits in a cockpit optimized for long-range work,
with its avionics, night-vision gear and the AWG-9 radar.
The Tomcat brought a matchless array of weapons to the fight.
You had the awesome long-range Phoenix, the mid-distance Sparrow,
the excellent Sidewinder for the knife fight, and of course, the gun.
No other fighter has ever matched it in this regard.
This selection, and the addition of a second brain to manage the fight,
more than counterbalanced the Tom's worst disadvantage,
which was its size and visibility at extreme eyeball range.

STUART "SCHWARTZ" BLACK, RAF





F-4A rear cockpit at night © TORI TWOMEY / PLANETX.COM





After a whole single-seat career, there I am with a RIO. It was weird at first, but I got with the program very rapidly. If the guy is good – and I have yet to come across a Tomcat RIO that isn't – he makes life worth living.

A lot of my Hornet pilots say, screw that, I'd rather take the 500 pounds in gas. They're wrong.

What's 500 pounds, a few minutes?

Those two eyeballs alone are worth it.

CHUCK "SNAPPER" WRIGHT



For us Prowler ECMOs the AWG-9 was one hard radar to jam. But more important than the gadget itself was the knob-twisting RIO you were dealing with. The good ones were sneaky bastards, and you were really going mano-a-mano trying to deny them a track.

RICK "STURMECMO" MORGAN

Just like Yeager and his wingman, we had a thing going with *Beemans* gum. Every day at mount-up my VF-32 RIO, Hey Joe, would drawl, *Hey, Ridley – got any Beemans?* I'd reply, *Yeah, Chuck, I think I got me a stick.* I actually chewed the same piece of *Beemans* for seven-plus hours during a CAP over Baghdad. My jaw was sore for three days.

JIM "DOG" KUHN



Coming out of the training command I felt pretty shit-hot as a pilot. I wasn't sure what RIOs were for, and I really wasn't crazy about them having command eject. I figured that if a RIO ever asked me "Do you have it?" I wasn't sure what I'd say. I'd fly us out no matter what.

VF-32, *Kennedy*, 1976.

We come off the cat and I work on my clearing turns, always a challenge in a 64-foot wingspan, 30-ton jet. Rotate, gear up, snap right, change heading, snap left – uh oh. Nothing.

No stick movement past center.

We're still turning right, nose slowly falling through from maybe 200 feet. Lots of screaming from the Air Boss, but his words aren't clear. What I do hear clearly is "Do you have it?" from the back seat. To my surprise I answer "No."

To his everlasting credit, while watching the water streak by under our wingtip and with his hands on the lower handle, Jerry "Mountain" Argenzio-West gave me two more seconds to get things working. We were stuck in the turn, but full top rudder started to inch the nose above the horizon. We finally put it down. Fodded fuel controls. It's just a snippet of what a RIO can mean. Great guys, working the systems, being smart, putting up with the kids in front, being a team.

STEVE "SPOON" WEATHERSPOON





There's always been this argument about the pilot just being there to steer while the RIO actually does the fighting. There's some truth to it. The RIO has the radar and the FLIR.

Of course, your pilot has to bring you back and land your ass at night, so I guess that counts for something.

TOM "SAPIR" NAGELIN, JR



One morning, Hoser and I are walking to the jet. I'm his RIO. He's walking kinda funny.

Hoser: Bean?

Beaner: What, Hoser.

Hoser: Tell me, do farts ever have lumps?

Beaner: Uh, no, Hose.

Hoser: OK, you preflight. I'll be back in ten minutes.

LEE "BEANER" BARTHOLD





After a quick visit to the dirty shirt for two bowls of chili,
Hoser mans up on *America* for a training hop in the Med.
Strange gurglings in his tank
and sweat on the brow even before the cat shot.

After a tanker visit, pain and increasing pressure
lead Hoser to question his ability to hold on until recovery.
He groans to his backseater, Lance "Larue" Lauer,
that he needs to land due to a pending sphincter valve failure.

Lance, renowned for his failing ears, just declares an emergency.

The Boss can't get the actual nature of the emergency out of the plane,
but he plays it safe, turns the ship, and launches the SAR helo.

As Hoser is dumping about 16k of fuel,
his sphincter valve slams open
for an uncommanded dumpex of its own.

A gruesome odor fills the cockpit
and poor Larue goes to full oxygen as he calls the ball.
After a 2-wire, Hoser parks the mighty aircraft in record time,
bolts down the ladder and disappears.

There were tales of a flight suit being thrown over the side.
Larue is also squadron safety officer, so he feels compelled to write up
the valve failure for dissemination to the CAG and Air Boss.

Late at night the ever-faithful ops yeoman
delivers it to communications.

Message duly received by Recon Wing One and CNAL.
The whole fleet wound up having a laugh.

JIM "FLATS" FLAHERTY



F-14 trap on Independence © DAN BAYER / FLANERX.COM







There we were at high noon,
ending up painfully defensive against a single-bubble Hornet.

I was in back, a FNG, with TOPGUN grad Bullet Bob Allen up front.
I was afraid to mention we were about to get our testicles handed to us.
Bullet would have said he was just suckering the guy in.

We were turning and burning,
and I was fighting off the Gs in my inexperience.
We were a half second away from letting this clown
dominate the debrief to our detriment.
Suddenly and violently we were tail-over-nose in a modified Lomchevok,
and the Hornet evaporated.

When I found him again he was at one low and Bullet was
calmly executing a high yo-yo to plunk the pipper
right on the back of the guy's helmet.

This was in an A, and those TF30s purred the whole time without a cough.
So we turned out to be the humble Zen masters of the debrief.

Later in the O Club Bullet fessed up.
He had pulled too hard
and had departed the straining, over-alpha'd Tomkitty.

The combination of the fastest "one turn in holding" maneuver
coupled with the flopping barn door drag of the manly interceptor
had been just enough to spit the little Hornet out in front of us.

I still laugh about it.
Don't believe a word of Bullet's version.

GERRY "TESTY" PARSONS



Monroe "Hawk" Smith flying F-4H © BOB LAWSON / JPLNETX.COM





Once Butch Thompson and I had to overnight at Rota, Spain, for some reason. We give the base the usual Navy fighter pilot treatment: fast initial, serious break, lots of vapes. Except I mean a very fast initial. When we get to the ops shack the yeoman is holding out a phone for us: Base Commander wants to speak to the F-14 pilot.

Oh, Jesus.
Butch takes it, expecting the worst.

It's Monroe "Hawk" Smith — a real legend:
"That was shit hot!
Report directly to the O Club for cocktails!"

We couldn't buy all night.

Hawk then gives us our instructions:
"When you leave tomorrow,
you don't have a single hair on your two asses
if you don't give us an air show.
Make me proud."

So we did.
Beat the place up for about ten minutes.

What a guy.

RICK "CREATURE" CREANGE





In April of 1975 I transferred to VX-4.

It was an interesting time,
with the F-14 OPEVAL in full swing.

One day there was a sympathy card from a Vigilante
squadron, expressing condolences and apologies for a
soon-to-join LCDR by the name of Joe Satrapa.

Hoser blew in, and things were never the same.

He came to us from RA-5s and F-8s;
he had never flown the Phantom or the Tomcat.
He did an abbreviated F-4 ground school at VF-121 and
came to us for his FAM.

We had a notorious Phantom hotshot,
John "Smash" Nash, who was famous for putting the
rookies in their place with a 1VI "orientation" hop.

Smash was a true chess master;
and Hoser had maybe three hours in the jet.
Hoser gunned Smash Nash in thirty seconds,
then set up and did it again.

Smash was a gent – he made sure Hoser was on the
team of six AIMVAL/ACEVAL pilots.

Hoser was probably the most instinctive fighter pilot the
modern Navy has seen.

Not to mention a bit too colorful for peacetime.

TOM "LTF" FOSTER



Q&A

JOHN "DEACON" DuGENE

I was a newbie in a Hoser lecture,
with him getting more and more torqued
as he described the various ways to gun somebody.
He points to some terrified recruit –
not me –
and asks in that booming voice:

"What do you do if you see the bullets spinning counterclockwise?"

"Break left, asshole, because
the bullets are going the wrong way – right at you."



I heard about that all-girl crew
and their convoy strafing run in Iraq or Afghanistan,
wherever the hell it was.
Forgive me, ladies, but that's some hard-dick stuff.
Makes old Hoser's heart go pitty-pat.

JOE "HOSER" SATRAPA





F-14 filming for TOP GUN at Fallon NV © GEORGE HALL / PLANETPIX.COM





Hoser was teaching guns and TARPS to the 101 nuggets.
He'd wear this outfit like Patton doing his monologue in the movie.

He'd start the lecture with a slide of an F-15,
the gunsight reticle dead center on the planform.
He'd ask, *Boys and girls, what's wrong with this picture?*

Silence – looked pretty righteous to us.
Then he'd yell,
THE PIPPER'S NOT ON THE GODDAM CANOPY!

JOHN “MASHER” CARRIER

Hoser was the one who got gun cameras working in the RAG.
He scrounged the cameras and projectors from God knows where.

We went from no one hitting the target – student or
instructor – to frequent century banners within a few months.
This success was with students and A-models carrying the original gun-
sight, with a 1000-foot diamond solution and dancing piper:

He always had the highest scores,
and he was brilliant at imparting his skill and tricks to others.

Pre-Hoser all RAG gunnery efforts had focused on
teaching the difficult gunnery pattern while avoiding collisions.
Hoser didn't care about the pattern, and he didn't care about midairs.
He cared about holes in the banner – and he got 'em, Baby...!

LIN “YANK” RUTHERFORD



F-14 Tomcats and A-4 Skyhawks mix it up during TOP GUN © GEORGE HALL / PLANETPX.COM



F-14 low-level at Fallon NV during training for TOP GUN © GEORGE HALL / PLANETPX.COM



Hoser's in a huge 4VMary during the AIM/ACE missile tests.

Hoser goes vertical from 10,000.
Then both motors flame out.

Getting sideways wasn't the only way to kill those damn TF30 engines.

On the way down from the troposphere,
waiting for air conducive to a relight,
Hoser sees an adversary F-5 rolling in to shoot him.

At the O Club he related the encounter:
Well, I was flamed out, AND I put out my cigarette.
So I know he couldn't call a Sidewinder on me.
He did anyway, and damned if the range didn't score a kill!

Vintage Satrapa.
More than his share of color; backed up by awesome skill.

You can bet he protested that missile call.
And you can bet he got it reversed.

JOHN "MASHER" CARRIER





As one of the Navy's AIM/ACE test pilots, evaluating how various combinations of aircraft types and missiles matched up in air combat, Hoser was scheduled for a IV2 scenario with two F-5s. At the hold for takeoff there's only one F-5. Joe Dawg Daughtry comes up and says his wingman has a problem.

So Hoser mimics cocking machine guns, like in a World War I fighter. A close-in gunfight. Dawg agrees.

They set up for the first pass, and Dawg is fifteen miles away when Hoser calls *Fox One* and shoots him with a Sparrow. They flash by and Joe yells, *What happened to the gunfight?* Hoser says, *Gee, I'm sorry, I lost control, let's do it again.* On the next setup Hoser calls *Fox Two* at three miles, like Lucy yanking the football. Daughtry is furious, and he's also out of gas. In the debrief Joe Dawg sputters, *Hoser, what ever happened to credibility?* Hoser, with appropriate hand gestures, laughs and says, *Credibility is DOWN, and kill ratio is UP.*

TOM "SOBS" SOBIECK



F-4D Phantom II vapor © TONY WOREY / PLANET.COM





Vought Sidewinder launch, VF-202 © GEORGE HALL / PLANEPix.COM

DIGITALLY REMASTERED

It's one thing to like guns, but Hoser was always a little exceptional.
He loved guns on the ground as well as in the jet.

He built a 20mm cannon patterned on the one in the Tomcat.
The thing blew up and mangled Hoser's hand.

The docs amputated a big toe and installed it as a thumb – so he could pick up right where he left off.

So today, he's Toe-ser
to them that know and love him.

He still flies.
Now it's S-2 firebombers in the California mountains.

Still pitching into the righteous fight.

MONROE “HAWK” SMITH



FireHoser flying turbine S-2 © CURTIS FOWLES / PLANEPix.COM





Back in '75 I was on the TOPGUN staff and Hoser was deep into AIM/ACE at Nellis.

We arranged to meet over the desert at Chocolate Mountain and compare ACM performance between the F-5 and the Tomcat.

I had a lot of time in the F-5, and the little bird felt like a second skin to me – I had some neat tricks, and I figured I could give Hoser a respectable fight.

We took two miles of lateral and the fight was on.

In no time we were beak to beak, and for me the fight unloaded from there – I tried all my slickest moves, but in fairly short order I was looking out the back at two huge intakes, "guns" reverberating in my headset.

Several more setups, same result – maybe worse. Finally Hoser said we'd start with me 1500 feet behind him.

Oh, yeah, I said to myself, he surely can't shake me from his dead tight six – wrong again.

He went hard nose up and did one of his famous "Vorbo-schka" maneuvers – stick full forward and to a corner, rudder full opposite – and I was soon watching this huge F-14 planform stopping in mid-air and flopping nose over as I slid out in front of him.

Kuns tracking at my six again!

I had no further questions.

The bottom line – not only was the Tomcat an awesome airplane, but in the hands of the few people in Hoser's league it was absolutely eye-watering.

Dale "Snort" Snodgrass was another of those gifted sticks that the rest of us can only admire and envy.

I was lucky to fly it.

ALEX "RATTLER" RUCKER



Snort piloting F-56, warbird © JOHN CLARK / PLANETX.COM

CALLING THE BALL

At the Kalamazoo air show Snort Snodgrass was flying the demo and taking turns manning the static. We were at the jet watching him in an animated discussion with a ten-year-old kid.

Afterward, the kid came over to us and asked,

"Sir, is it true what that pilot said about that movie *TOP GUN*?"

"What's that, kid?"

"He said there were two things lame with the movie ...

first, Tomcat pilots never sweat in a fight,

and second, no Tomcat pilot's gonna need a whole week to get laid."

I said, "True enough, son, but I don't recommend you repeat it in front of your mom!"

Precocious little bugger:

Naval Aviation wants his ass in about a decade.

BRIAN "DONGER" GAWNE





Commanding the Diamondbacks
in 1994-1995 was the ultimate.

My XO, Coolie Voetsch,
and I had superb department heads and JOs.

We also had not one but two of the finest
maintenance geniuses in the history of Naval aviation,
Master Chiefs Hooch Dallatore and Keith Hurlbert.

We never lacked aircraft – never.
I remember leading a flight of ten nonstop to Fallon, tank-
ing from KC-135s.

There is nothing like coming up on center
after a frequency change, calling “**Diamond Check**,”
then hearing

“Two,” “Three,” “Four,” “Five,” “Six,”
“Seven,” “Eight,” “Nine,” “Ten”

as you look up and back at the cons all around you.

On America’s last deployment
we trapped fourteen Diamondbacks
in fourteen consecutive passes.

The ship’s skipper, Benny Suggs,
had to come down to the ready room
and offer his congratulations after that one.

During Desert Storm
we routinely launched in
virtually perfect condition – clean OBCs,
no anomalies, all checks on the BITs.

DON “PIRATE” BARBAREE



The Mutha award is still hard to define.

It wasn’t necessarily about scores, or sorties flown, or safety.

There were other awards for those.

It was about spirit.

This boiled down to leadership, of course.

It went to the west coast squadron that showed the most style and had the most fun.

Along with the comparable Clifton for the east coast folks,
it was the most coveted award in the Tomcat world.

MIKE “WIZZARD” McCABE



F-14D final 2005 Oceana airshow demo © RICHARD VANDERHEULEN / FLANERX.COM





Just thinking about the Mutha brings a smile to my face.

When BRAC shut down Miramar
and VF-124 closed its doors,
Mutha was suddenly without a sponsor
since the CO of 124
acted as "Mutha" and decided annually on the winner.
So the tradition made the trip
to the east coast and passed to VF-101
where I was CO.
It took only an hour or so
for my west coast instructors
to educate and convince me
that the camaraderie it brought along
was worth the effort.

Of course the statue was the ugliest thing I'd ever seen,
but squadrons would literally die for it.
Most considered it to be more prestigious
than any other traditional award.

As the competition heated up that first year,
one ranking squadron picked me up
in a painted-up van to take me to
the Fighter Fling golf tournament.
Inside the van was a recliner;
newspapers, and McD's for breakfast.
I ended up having to give the van
a starter jump before we went anywhere.
I found out later the Rippers had sabotaged it.

STEVE "COOLIE" VOETSCH



VF-11 Mutha CAG bird © MIKE GROVE / PLANEPX.COM



F-4 Toward of VF-21 © TONY WOREY / PLANEPX.COM



I was brand-new to the Tomcat, with perhaps twenty traps.
Nonetheless I was the skipper's driver,
and we were coming aboard *America* to kick off our 1989 Med Cruise.

We flew wing on the CAG.
He led us into the break and two hook-up approaches
before we dropped 'em for the first traps of the cruise.

As I started my turn I saw CAG crossing the ramp.

Then the unexpected word "bolter" bounced around in my helmet.

Caught off-guard, I quickly called the ball,
made some corrections and slammed aboard.

I mentioned jokingly to the skipper – Bo Eddington –
that it was sure nice of CAG to mess up
and give the first trap to the newest guy in the air wing.

He gently pointed out that CAG had bolted on purpose,
for just that reason.

I regret never thanking ADM Jay "Jaybird" Johnson
for that example of gracious leadership.

But I've remembered it all these years.

KEN "NUBS" NEUBAUER





ALL FIGHTER PILOTS TELL STORIES

but when Viper spoke up, everybody quieted down.
You knew you were about to learn something new.

He was a legend among us – an eccentric genius and the smartest person in any room he entered.

Art “Viper” Cebrowski transcended any organization you put him in.

His generation were all veterans of Yankee Station and the crucible of Vietnam – guys who had wrestled SAMS and jousted with MiGs.

But you never really got stories of derring-do from Viper.

He was always thinking ten steps ahead of the rest of us.

And he did it with almost giddy enthusiasm – like a kid who just discovered a shiny Flexible Flyer under the Christmas tree.

Rumor had it that he was the father of vector logic – he and a couple of JOs had figured out in marathon sessions at Miramar. The guy was walking wisdom.

I remember CAG Cebrowski entering our ready room once on a no-fly day.

He started chatting up the JOs: *What’s the Backfire’s max range? Where do they fly from?*

How many degrees of coverage would we need to defend the battle group from threats at range X, Y or Z?

He grabbed the cross-country string and queried us about the threat axis if we pulled back to this or that max range.

Whenever we’d answer he would crinkle up with excitement.

He said, *Could you capture these ideas and put them in a brief for me?*

His manner and leadership not only put ideas in your head – he made you think you’d come up with them yourself.

Art’s contributions to transformation and net-centric warfare will be his lasting legacy.

During his confirmation as Director of Force Transformation he took those politicians to school,

and he elicited the same reverential silence I remembered from the ready room 20 years before.

He was talking the stuff he loved, and he again became that little boy with the new Flexible Flyer.

Mentor, hero, genius, visionary, legend, Tomcat pilot, husband, father – and a little boy with a new sled.

We’ll miss you, Viper.

MARK “CLEM” CLEMENTE





F-4 at Minamir © KETH CHAPMAN / PLANETPIX.COM







I used to have a remote-controlled camera pod that would mount on any standard hard point. In the TOPGUN formation I'm in the back seat of the far F-5F, trying to eyeball the shot from the outside, firing the camera by radio. The players: Sandy "Jaws" Winnefeld flying the F-5, Don "Dirt" Kingery and Brad "Ler" Poeltler in the VF-302 Tomcat, and future Blue Angels skipper George "Elwood" Dom in a TOPGUN A-4 Mongoose. The camera ship was a VMFA-531 F/A-18 flown by skipper Manfred "Fokker" Rietsch, USMC.

The pod traveled to Japan with great results. Dana "Smudge" Potts, CO of VF-154, used it to capture shots of his Black Knights bubbas over Mount Fuji.

GEORGE HALL



F-15s of VF-154 over Mount Fuji Japan © DANA POTTS / PLANETPX.COM



SHOOTING STARS

The Tomcat has had several brushes
with cinematic fame.

A film called
THE FINAL COUNTDOWN

gave the bird top billing,
and the visuals are terrific still.
But the movie — about a carrier
being transported back in time
to the day before Pearl Harbor —
did dismally at the box office.

JAG, a long-running TV series
produced by old Marine aviator
Don Bellisario, featured
a lead character who
flew Tomcats before law school.
Of course CDR Rabb
in every other show
on a series of wild pretexts.

And then there's **TOP GUN**.

Forget that they added
a space to the name.
The film put not only
Tom Cruise
but also the F-14 Tomcat
on the map.
The Navy, which backed
the film completely,
saw a huge spike in recruitment
as the movie zoomed
to the top of the charts.
It lives on as one of
the hottest video rentals
of all time.

Showbiz, Baby...!

F-14 of "Hornet" and "Slater," photographed from the Clay Lacy Astrorvision Learjet © GEORGE HALL / PLANETRIX.COM





*Clay Lacy has flown close to
5,000 filming sorties with his
specially-equipped Learjet camera bird.
He also happens to be
the world's high-time jet pilot, with over
50,000 hours in at least a hundred types.*

We flew most of the filming flights
out of the Navy base at Fallon,
about an hour east of Reno.

We use a Learjet with a system called
Astrovision, which involves two periscopes
so the movie cameras can look
in just about any direction.

When you're shooting with as many as ten
fast jets in the air, you'd better figure out
very carefully who does what and where.
Every hop would start
with a thorough brief.

The TOPGUN operations guy – who was
nicknamed Rat – would work up
a plan with the film director; and
we'd all get told exactly where to be.
We've done a lot of this kind of filming, and
it can get pretty nerve-wracking
if people aren't doing what they're
supposed to do.

I never had an anxious moment
on **TOP GUN**, even with all those
big Tomcats zooming around.

Those guys were all on top of it –
completely professional.

And then it's nice to have two more eyes
and another brain in the back seat.

Seems to me the Admiral even flew
on some hops – that bad Russian
who gets blasted in the last dogfight,
that was a Rear Admiral.





I shot stills for the movie **TOP GUN** from the primary photo jet. The huge aerial dogfights were all staged out of Fallon. Rat Willard was the TOPGUN ops officer at the time, and controlled everything by radio. It was pretty exciting to be looking DOWN on those Tomcats as they zorched by at Mach .9 or so.

For the deck action, the film crew had to keep going back out to the carrier. Frankly, they weren't getting good enough footage. It was very difficult shooting on the flight deck, with all that cumbersome movie equipment and the amount of noise and motion all around.

One little Hollywood secret: you know all that great sunset stuff that starts off the movie? All of it was shot in the final few minutes of the very last shooting session on the ship.

GEORGE HALL





F-4s roll in on instructors in A-4s during movie filming for TOP GUN © GEORGE HALL / PLANETX.COM



There were movie hops where the film guys had at least eight different cameras in the fight. Besides the Lacy Learjet there were cameras actually mounted on the jets, in boxes that Grumman had built way back, and in a centerline photo pod borrowed from China Lake. And back-seaters took small 35mm movie cameras. Heater did a lot of good filming, and I did a lot of not-so-good filming. There were also a couple of Air Force cameramen, up from the test units at Edwards and Norton. They really knew their stuff. It seems like a lot of cameras and film, but the film producers figured it was nothing compared to the cost of putting up all those jets. Don't hold me to it, but I think the bill was about ten thousand an hour for the Tomcats and four thousand for the F-5s and A-4s. Believe it or not, the entire aerial filming budget came in under a million.

DAVE "BIO" BARANEK





F-14 moonlight © CJ HEATLEY / PLANETPIX.COM



F-14s of VF-84 © BOB LAWSON / PLANETPIX.COM



REFLEX ACTION

The secret was always having the camera with me – I only burned film when conditions were perfect and the business of the day was done. I'd get my wingman to move up tight, framed against the sky or the sunset. The perfect photo hops didn't come along often. But they didn't have to.

◀ CJ "HEATER" HEATLEY

The Tomcat is the ultimate photo jet – big, roomy, fantastic viz. But in the Tom you're not just a passenger. Call and response with the pilot on the takeoff checklist – harness, pins, hookups. Hundreds of circuit breakers. Tank jettison switches in the safe position. Engine start – you begin turning stuff on. System, boxes, radar. Enter lat/long into the INS. Wait for alignment – BIT check for the AWG-9. Radio, TACAN, Radar Warning – then standby for radar and RWR until the wheels are up. Remember: left foot, hot mike – right foot, radio!

GEORGE "GEORGE HALL" HALL ▶

I have 22 Tomcat hops in my logbook. Some skippers and CAGs loved having me take pictures and publicize them – others didn't want anyone in their back seats except qualified RIOs. So I missed a lot of squadrons. I just went where I was tolerated.

◀ "PHOTO BOB" LAWSON





VX-9 F-4A test at Point Mugu © GEORGE HALL / PLANETX.COM





My first three choices were Tomcats east, Tomcats west and Tomcats anywhere. Since I was not exactly the golden boy around the boat, Naval Aviation saw fit to place me in a nameless, less-sexy Grumman product at Oceana, the one with the pointy end at the back instead of the front.

One day, while driving with his lovely bride, LTJG Guadagnini said – pointing to a gaggle of Tomcats in the pattern – “Would you love me better if I were flying pretty jets like that?” To which the reply was made, “The Navy won’t let you fly pretty jets!”

I determined there and then to place myself in the Big Fighter to keep the love of a beautiful woman. Three years later I started flying the F-14, a varsity sport that I would continue for the next twenty years, including combat flights in the skies over Afghanistan and Iraq.

And wouldn’t you know: that wonderful woman I married did indeed start loving me more, thus lending another scientific data point to the theory that *Fighter Guys Get the Best Chicks!*

MARK “GUADS” GUADAGNINI



Flying Tomcats was like dating the hottest chick in school.

We were all young, strong, fast – and so was our fighter;
We were also a little arrogant, irreverent, daring – and so was our fighter;
Dave Frost used to say, “The only people impressed by fighter pilots are little boys and other fighter pilots!”
We laughed hard and deep and often, but no one laughed at the babe we dragged around town – that Grumman Ironworks, afterburner-crackling, muscle-backed beauty.
So we fell in love.

Puppy love at first, but after almost 4000 hours and 1000 trips home from work, I think it’s the real deal.

We spent our youth and middle age together:
Then all of a sudden ... it’s over!
It hurts, it truly hurts.

They say that everybody loves his airplane, just as every mother loves her child.
But not everybody got to date, and marry, the hottest chick in school!

MARK “CLEM” CLEMENTE





F-16 © RICHARD VANDERPELTEN / PLANETX.COM



I was at the big Nellis air show, and everybody was buzzing about the first public demo of the F-22. Lots of generals in the bleachers, the whole deal. The F-22 demo was just plain lame. Hard deck of 1000 feet AGL, weak turns, no high speed passes. Like they're afraid to break the thing, which they were. Who's up next on the schedule? Why, the Tomcat, of course. These guys just beat the place up. Flog this Air Force base mercilessly. The crowd goes bananas, and I'm yelling along with them. Tell me who those two lunatics were, and I'll buy them a cocktail.

BRIAN "PUNCHY" SHUL, SR-71 BLACKBIRD PILOT



For Tomcat crew Tony "Opie" Walley up front and Joe "Smokin'" Ruzicka in the back office – **IT'S HAPPY HOUR, BABY...!**



F-16 © TYSON MININGER / PLANETX.COM



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Readiness © JON HOUGHTALING / FLANERX.COM



Yeah, we're all
drinking the *Kool-Aid*
and flying the Super Hornet.
It's a wonderful jet,
and it's only going to get better.
But it will never be cool.
The Tomcat was cool.

What does a girl know
about sexy jets?

I know sexy when I see it.

**ASHLEY "CIAO"
AUGUSTINI**





VF-213 section takeoff © RICHARD VANDERHELEN / PLANETX.COM



F-4A of VF-14 Black Knights over Mount Fuji, Japan © DANA POTTS / PLANEPX.COM



F-4 © BOB LAWSON COLLECTION / PLANEPX.COM



F-4D map © TTYSON BININGER / PLANEPX.COM





“

I flew all of the
teen fighters in one day.
I went up in a Tomcat and
a Hornet in the morning.
After lunch I flew an F-15E
and a TOPGUN F-16.

Kind of a stunt, but hey.

When you're an admiral
you can do stuff like that.

JAY “SPOOK” YAKELEY

”







The mighty Tomcat, with its sleek lines, swept delta and sheer size, was always the best-looking jet at any air show. We were strictly static at the show – no demo – but there was a tradition at Daytona of flashy and competitive fly-bys on departure.

We saw some hot stuff – a Phantom low transition, a Viper breaking left into a 9G snowball, an Eagle pulling vertical with rolls to 30k.

We were in the second day's go, along with an F-111 and a B-1 – the noisiest and fastest jets in the show.

Those guys actually made pretty lame efforts, so we determined to give everyone a true high-speed pass – vaping right at Mach .96. After a righteous low transition takeoff we came around and down, unloading to build energy and to make the Air Force guys look like the weenies they were.

My trusty RIO, Bob "Rip" Schroeder, was calling the number – .93, .94, .95.

I thought, no sweat, this pig has tanks and rails.

We were still accelerating at show center; the magic needle showing God knows what.

Then came a big-G vertical pull to our cleared altitude.

We knew something was afoot when we got to Oceana and saw the blistering and peeling in the brand-new paint job.

Then the show sponsor called, gushing enthusiastically about the supersonic pass and shock wave.

We thought no way – they're just confusing vapes with the real deal. But a tape showed up a few days later

from our Embry Riddle sponsor:

The supersonic shock cone was unmistakable.

Some car alarms went off, but thankfully nothing broke.

We mysteriously avoided an unpleasant audience with the skipper.

JOHN "OLLY" OLLIGES



F-4A takeoff © DANA POTTS / PLANEPIC.COM



F-4 landing at sandown © CJ HEATLEY / PLANEPIC.COM





The opening demo maneuver was supposed to be an Immelmann on takeoff, but on that first practice flight at Oceana the maneuver transformed into a full loop.

The eggheads at Grumman asserted it was impossible.

It would have been, except that we were flying a new Block 54 jet,
among the first to incorporate leading edge slats.
They saved our bacon.

The plane had very light fuel and it popped up in less than half the usual distance.

The gear had just finished retracting as we came over the top at 1600 feet AGL.
By the time I realized that I needed to roll the aircraft, we were pointed at the ground.
Watching the earth come up, stick in my lap, I said, *Eric, we can't make it. Prepare to eject.*

An incredibly cool Eric "Sodbuster" Benson calmly replied,
Not a good idea, skipper. We're out of the envelope. Come up with something else.

At this point the jet was in terminal wing rock, plummeting earthward.

I needed airspeed.
Against my instincts, I released back pressure, applied throttle
and then pegged the angle of attack just below stall.
As we bottomed out and started gaining altitude I could see twin clouds of dust in my mirrors.
Observers on the ground gave our altitude as between 10 and 25 feet.

As we taxied in I saw FITWING's sedan on the ramp.
He, John Disher, along with CAG Moon Moreau, had witnessed the whole sorry spectacle.

They finally let us fly the demo a week later at Andrews, but not with the Immelmann.
And not without a severe butt-chewing.

BILL TOWNSEND



F-14 © DAVE BARANEK / PLANETRX.COM





On our final student ACM det at Key West, the XO asked Zoom Gill how fast he was going in the break.

XO: Zoom, that break looked awfully fast – what were you doing?

Zoom: 500 knots.

XO, thinking he'd bring the RAG instructor to his knees: Why so fast?

Zoom: 'Cuz that's as fast as I could get it in mil power.

“ROCK” DAZE



I have several friends who claim to have seen Mach 2.5 up at 70,000 feet.

I never went that fast.

That's my story and I'm sticking to it.

RICK “WIGS” LUDWIG





CAT CALLS

*The call sign is an enduring tradition.
If it's not a play on your name, then it relates to something stupid you did.
Of course you hate it.
You're supposed to hate it.
That's the Zen of it.*

*And don't even think about changing it.
An Air Guard general, an F-15 wing commander, decided he was going to morph into Turbo.
He had the Porsche and everything.
He passed the word down the line: the boss will henceforth be known as Turbo.*

Yeah, right.

*Some culinary genius in the ranks pointed out that the
Turbot
is a scrumptious member of the Flounder family.*

Flounder it was, and Flounder it remains to this day.

And this was a general.

Beware of what you wish for.

SIERRA HOTEL, BABY...!

MARBLES

Jess Parnell

*The call sign is a cautionary tale.
I decided I wanted to be Captain Marvel.
Had the shirt and everything.
Of course you don't pick your own call sign.
So I was Marbles.
They also claimed I mumbled on the radio.*

BRILLO

Paul Filardi

*Allow me to lift my cover
and you'll see where my call sign came from.*

SNAPPER

Chuck Wright

*The call sign is from my A-7 days.
One day I was buddy-tanking from another
Corsair, and I caught one of those sine-wave
things, a strange oscillation in the hose.
Boom – snaps my probe right off.*

MINNOW

Bill McMinn

*Of course Minnow hooks up with my last name,
but it also doesn't hurt
that I've gone into the water twice.*

TUMOR

Tom Twomey

*Somebody suggested I should be "Socket",
like "sock it to me" – but it was too late.
I was stuck.*

FATAL

Al Krause

It was actually "Fat Al," but when I made department head my skipper thought we needed something more fitting.

VELCRO

Bob Riera

Bob, a true leader of men,
had amazingly short, coarse, curly hair:
He could easily affix his nametag to his scalp.
Like "Velcro."

BOOM BOOM

Dave Serhan

That's about what it sounds like when you take
a cat shot with the parking brakes engaged.
I'm just lucky they don't associate me
with the guy who shot Kennedy.

FARKLE

Bill Freckleton

There was this Farkle Family bit
on the old TV comedy show *Laugh-In*.
I even looked like them.

EASY

Jeff Lay

What are you going to do?
Some things just follow naturally.
But I'm not sniveling.

RIGOR

Lew Van Meter

I was about comatose one morning
after a night of liberty.
I apparently looked dead.

BIO

Dave Baranek

Pronounce my name right and it sort of
sounds like Bionic – the Bionic Man.
My brother is a RIO,
and we call him "Bob" – Brother of Bio.

SCHWARTZ

Stu Black, RAF

It's German for my last name.
I flew an exchange tour in German Navy
Phantoms – a few years later I was
instructing in Tomcats at Oceana.
Pretty good for a little old RAF guy.

NORTON

Doug Carney, USAF

On the old Jackie Gleason show,
the knucklehead neighbor Norton
was played by the late Art Carney.
There you go.

HEY JOE

Dave Parsons

I was usually the squadron guy
for patches and t-shirts.
There were these little kids in the Philippines
who'd run along and try to sell stuff to sailors.
They'd tug your sleeve and say "Hey Joe."

PHOTO BOB

Bob Lawson

Since I flew so much, we tried all kinds of hooks.
But Hawk Smith always called me "Photo Bob,"
so it stuck.

GEORGE HALL

George Hall

I flew once with an F-15 outfit in Germany.
Only weeks before they had lost one of their
own in an accident, an Eagle driver
named George Hall.
Apparently he had made it all the
way to a squadron without ever
getting a call sign.
So the boys finally stuck him
with "George Hall" – they figured it was the
most boring name in history.

HOSER

Joe Satrapa

Back in the F-8 days I gunned a banner
with all four of those magnificent cannons.
Emptied them in one pass – over 500 rounds.
No hits!
Skipper said, “Looks we have a Hoser here.”

HAWK

Monroe Smith

I always had the eyes,
and for the most part I still do.
Like Yeager – in his 80s and still no specs.

CHUM

Bryan Herdlick

I got run over by a ski boat
and got my right side all carved up.
I was human chum for a few minutes –
fortunately no sharks around.
I persist in telling girls about my war wounds.
It actually works every now and then.
The smart ones ask to see the Purple Heart.

ROCK

? Daze

I took the call sign thing to extremes.
Rock started in boat school – a combination of
my boxing experience and my stellar head work.
Now it's the only name I use.
I'm not sure what my first name is any more.

WHEELS

Glen Wheless

I take the all-time destiny prize for call signs.
With my name I was “Wheels,” of course.
Then I had an unfortunate accident that put me in the chair for the duration.
I exchanged a budding RIO career for a lifelong tour as a sim instructor.
I've gone from a standing-up nugget RIO in VF-14 to a sitting-down 2F112 sim instructor
as well as a senior O Club rat – all the while keeping Wheels as a too-perfect call sign.

I took great satisfaction from watching so many young tigers as they grew in talent and leadership.
Some are now flags, some are captains, some are retired, and some are gone.

We were in the Golden Age of Naval Aviation and we didn't even know it.

We get together at the Club and it's as if we're all just stupid JOs again,
waiting for Tasha to assume the duty at the back bar:

I can still see us through all the cigar smoke.
We're all young again, just as the Tomcat was, and in my mind that's the way it will always be.



PHOTO: CORNER WALLTOP © TONY WOODHEAD/FLANERAC.COM



SWAN SONG



LAST CALL

It was fast, it was mean,
it was the blown '57 Chevy
of tactical aviation.

I guarantee you that everyone
wanted to fly it, even just once.
Anyone who did fly it
will tell you it wasn't
the sports car that
some other jets are,
but they will also tell you
that there was nothing like going
to Zone V on the cat at night.
The sheer power
you felt in the seat of your pants
was awesome.

In this business
you always remember
your first love,
and I'm happy that mine
was the F-14 Tomcat.

PAT "STUBBY" CLEARY





F-14 slip flyoff © TED CARLSON / PLANETPIX.COM





F-14 sunset trap © DANA POTTS / PLANEPX.COM





F-4 Phantom II © DANA POTTS / PLANETPIX.COM



I can see the day when there's no squadrons left and one lousy boat – unmanned vehicles darkening the skies. We'll all be toothless at the Tailhook convention, mumbling about the good old Tomcat days.

AL "FATAL" KRAUSE





To say flying the F-14 has been the most exciting, enjoyable and rewarding time of my life would be an understatement.

Every time I walked to the jet the hairs on the back of my neck would stand to attention, just as they did when I first saw a Tomcat as a lowly 19-year-old Prowler troubleshooter:

Six years later, after college and AOCS, there I was in the front seat of my dream bird.

I did three years with the Dogs, bagged 450 traps on 1.5 cruises, and then – oops – received orders for a F/A-18 flight test.

The Hornet was and is a great aircraft, but it can't hold a candle to the raw power and seat-of-the-pants feel of the Mighty 'Cat.

Plus the Turkey looks way sexier!

I feel honored to have been afforded the chance to fly and fight this awesome machine, a machine that not only helped to develop a successful career but also provided me with an unwavering goal.

And then there was pure unadulterated personal satisfaction as a delicious topping.

Today as I nip at the heels of soft middle age, the Mighty 'Cat is still with me, staving off that impulse to trade in the wife and go for the Porsche.

For I can look back and say, Chill out, Dude – you once flew the TOMCAT!

RICH "MUDDOG" GARCIA



I wanted from the age of nine to be a Tomcat pilot. Not just a pilot, or a fighter pilot, or a Navy pilot, but a Tomcat pilot.

Big posters on my wall in the third grade, the whole deal. I just couldn't imagine any other outcome.

I flew starting in high school and got all my private tickets. Then, there it was.

It could have gone on a lot longer; but hey, I'm luckier than most.

I got 800 hours, a combat cruise, quite a few bombs dropped, even a strafing run.

It's way more than most people get, and I was glad to be there.

CARRINE "SWEATY" CASSADY





F-14 vents fuel © TORI TWOMEY / PLANETPIX.COM





Break © JOHN CLARK / PLANETX.COM





Beautiful spring day, 1986.

The remains of the skipper's Vietnam cruise roommate were returned for burial at Arlington, and the family had requested a Tomcat fly-by courtesy of the VF-142 Ghostriders. We got things set up east of Dulles before pushing in, descending to 1000 feet and a comfy swept-wing speed of 250 knots.

I was the Missing Man.

On the mark – from a USAF liaison officer using a UHF portable at the gravesite – I selected Zone V and went into a 60-degree climb, throwing in a few victory rolls.

I dropped down, rejoined, and we exited over Washington National.

The next day the Commodore calls the flight lead and me into his office.

A deceased Army three-star was awaiting burial after our skipper's friend. His casket, loaded on a caisson, was dumped unceremoniously off the back end when the horses spooked under the stress of the Zone V attack.

The coffin slid down an adjacent hill, and a cemetery worker in a golf cart knocked down two tombstones trying to avoid it.

There were few private video recorders in those days, fortunately, so nothing showed up on the evening news.

Following that lamented flyover, the Air Force in its infinite wisdom cancelled all Navy Missing Man formations at Arlington for many years.

JOHN "JT" MORRIS





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F-14 © TED CARLSON / PLANEPix.COM



Koko with final litter – who let all the teenagers into the club! © GEORGE HALL / PLANEPix.COM



I had seven good years in the Tomcat, and I'm grateful for every minute. I remember my last flight. We just went out single-ship and honked around for an hour like idiots, low on the water and very, very fast. It was very emotional, standing on that big wing before climbing down for the final time.

JIM "MOUTH" McCALL

Somebody had to be the last Tomcatter, and that's me. I don't mind being the last Tomcat pilot to qualify. Being the last Tomcat pilot to DISqualify – that I would have minded. I could snivel about being a short-timer in the jet, or I could relax, fly the snot out of it, enjoy a full combat cruise, take what I can get. Which is a lot more than the poor sap behind me is going to get.

MATT "KOKO" NIESWAND





F-14 on carrier elevator © DAVE BAKANIK / PLANETPIX.COM





Tomcat sunset © CJ HEATLEY / PLANEPX.COM



F-14 © JAN JACOBS / PLANEPX.COM



I started as a young black shoe
and grew into an old brown shoe.
Because of my stellar academic
performance at the boat school,

I wound up on the deck
of a splendid old cruiser;
the *USS Harry E. Yarnell*.

It took a lot of flailing to get to
Pensacola, but one day there I was,
the senior student in all CNATRA.

I got to piss away the whole
summer, on El Tee pay, in the pool,
both literally and figuratively.

They didn't have me
starting until October:

Two years later there I am —
on *America* in the Med with
Hey Joe, Horse, Geno, Geyser
and Rock, among
too many other greats.

We're all getting paid
to fly the Tomcat.

I couldn't believe it then,
and I still can't.

The kids get younger;
the flight suits get tighter; the staff
gets bigger; and then you retire.

At this stage of my life I'm
proudest when I look back and say,

I flew Tomcats.

SAM "DOG" SOWELL





F-14 deck © TORI TWOMEY / PLANETIX.COM



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People say it's such a tragedy that these jets are being destroyed.

I agree, but if anybody has to do it, it should be my team.

We've been babying these 'Cats for thirty years. It's like putting a family pet to sleep. You know the time has come, but that doesn't make you feel any better.

BILL "TACO" BELL



Gunfighter 160 and I wrapped up our Tomcat flying careers together.

Accepted by the Navy in March 1993. Left Oceana for her final flight on 19 September 2005. Overnight at North Island, then a short flight the following day to the museum at Castle AFB, Merced. Four touch-and-goes, plus honks around the pattern to burn off fuel. We had to hand her over completely empty.

She ran about a half hour on the ground, the right engine finally sputtering and flaming out at 13:26:46 PST.

The Grim Reapers were officially out of the business of flying and training.

PAUL "BUTKUS" HAAS



I still can't believe it. Some schemers at Pax River found a loophole in the NA-VAIR flight waiver process, and there I was, evaluating aircrew protective gear and doing arresting gear trials at Lakehurst with Curt Dosé. Forty hours in Tomcats as a college student – I'm pretty sure I hold the record for being the youngest Tomcat aircrewman ever.

GLENN "CON" CONNOR

I grew up with the Tomcat, so I got to start as a fighter pilot and tack on recon, strike, FAC(A) and more. Big motors, a real HUD and digital flight controls were icing on the cake. The Turkey was simply one of the finest and most versatile platforms ever conceived.

RANDY "GUS" KING



No fighter has ever garnered such a following while carving so few notches: only five in US service, but perhaps 100 or more by Iran against Iraq. Now the Tomcat is gone, and with it the end of a long, long era. And in one of the biggest ironies in all aviation history, the Tomcat will continue flying in the hands of one of America's bitterest enemies, and who can say where that situation will lead? It's possible that eventually the Tomcat will finish its days fighting Hornets, Vipers and Eagles. But hey, maybe that's not entirely bad. The F-14 was born and bred a warrior. Better to die in battle than submit to the cutter and the shredder. Or become a fish habitat! As the Romans used to say at such parlous times, *IN PERPETUUM, FRATER: AVE ATQUE VALLE, Baby...!*

BARRETT "SHOOTER" TILLMAN





End of the rainbow © FORTY TWO MEY / PLANEPIC.COM



I had the honor of flying many times with the late Dave "Red Flash" Walker. He was a matchless pilot and later an astronaut on the shuttle. We were up for an engine test over the Med one day. We're at 37,000 feet and maybe Mach 1.2. For some reason the boat calls and orders us on deck immediately. I tell 'em we'll catch the hook in two minutes. Flash goes vertical, corkscrewing down at 1.5 or more. We scream into the initial at a good 550 knots. Do a God-awful 7-G break, drop the gear around 275 knots. Bang it down on time.

When we're climbing out, I look up in the clear sky. I say to Flash,
*See that perfect spiral contrail?
That was you and me, Baby,
90 seconds ago.*

JIM "GILLY" GILBERT



Hell of a thing seeing our old Tomcat retiring at the absolute top of its game – indispensable to the warfare commander. And Tom's setting the bar pretty high for the Super Hornets. You hear it all the time from the strike leaders, battlegroup commanders and CAGs: Give the hard targets to the Tomcats. And you'll hear it as long as the bird is around.

JOE "JOEY" AUCCOIN



Here I am in the last F-14 squadron, winding up the final cruise. I'll probably be the last RIO in the Navy. In a few months I'll be ferrying one of our birds to the desert, or to some museum to sit on a stick. Kind of sad, especially when you look at our performance on this last boat trip. In combat the Tomcat rose to the top of the stack, and with the addition of ROVER we were kicking ass as never before. The Tom was the universal first choice for the tough jobs. Our last remaining aircraft are like no other fighters on earth.

ERIC "SYPHIN" McMULLEN



We've all seen a lot of cool things. My high point was watching Aardvarks XO Killa Kilkenny doing the high-speed fly-by at the 1985 Miramar air show. After the Friday practice the Admiral told Killa he wanted lower and faster: There must have been a quarter of a million victims as Killa hit The Big Number at the 9 board, 20 feet AGL. The noise from the boom was numbing – there were babies crying, kids screaming, strong men fainting, dogs and cats doing sick things together, you name it. Of course all the Tomcat bubbas were high-fiving and downing additional libations. The boom broke glass and cracked stucco all over town. The JOs spent the next two weeks canvassing neighborhoods and assessing claims for the JAG investigation. Yeah, Baby...!

JOHN "DEACON" DuGENE





I think Dave "Genghis" Kahn and I may hold the Tomcat record – probably the Civilized World Fighter record – for consecutive loops. It was my last flight before getting wetted down, and we wanted something novel. We'd heard of some idiot doing 20, so we went for 25 and blew right past it. Nothing to it: start at 15,000, go over the top at 21,000 and 80 knots. Then we decided to go for 50. Around number 42 I'm wondering whether this is such a bright idea. So 45 minutes, 11,500 pounds of gas and two vertical hangovers later we were done. On the ride back to Oceana it took a good fifteen minutes for my head to get recaged.

Later at the O Club I asked him why we did it.
His answer: "Because we could, Baby...!"

CHUCK "CUDDLES" WYATT





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You bet I have mixed emotions.

I've flown the Tomcat my entire career. I have over 2500 hours in it, with very little grief. It's a great airplane. I love flying it. You get an emotional attachment to an aircraft you fly, especially that much. But I realize the future of Naval aviation lies with the Super Hornet and other follow-ons. It's time for the Tomcat to move on.

DOUG "MUDDY" WATERS



Flying the Tomcat was an absolute pleasure. It was often a fair amount of work to coax it airborne, but it was worth every minute. There's nothing like a day cat shot in a Tomcat, cloud surfing for a couple of hours and then raising a round of Wild Turkey shots at the club with the best fighter pilots in the world. I believe the Tomcat was a true icon of Naval aviation. It defined an era and embodied the noble fighter spirit. I will truly miss the majestic beast. Now like most Navy jet pilots I've moved on to the Hornet. Its reliability, its incredible handling qualities and its weapons systems make it a formidable platform and a treat to fly. I've been blessed to fly fantastic planes, meet amazing people and live a great career.

JEFF "BAJA" HART



I was fortunate to serve with the best of the Tomcat community, and that's saying something.

To be led by skippers and XO's like T-Ball Hayden, Archie Manning, Puke McClane, Ratbreath Enright and JB Collins. To team with RIOs the likes of Gumbo Hebert, BD Bedford, Bones Moroney, Creature Creange and Aswipe Ashlman. To serve with maintainers and shipmates like Taco Bell, Hooch Dallatore, Keith Hurlbert, Airman Watts, Davey Jones, Flash Gorton. It all came together as we took to the skies in Grumman's magnificent Tomcat.

Our nation would not have been as safe without her and the men and women behind the machine.

DON "PIRATE" BARBAREE



I'm glad to say I had a part in getting the jet into the air-to-ground phase of its life. I'm proud and lucky to have flown this airplane for over twenty years, with people like Rookie, Hunyack, Naked, Beef, Turps, Dirt – squared, Pounder, Gabby, G-Man, Shoe, Shoes, Rooster, Zoom, Bump, Viper, Menace, Peeper, Hank, Batman, Gramps, Falcon, Iceman, Needles, Wheels, Ripper, Music, Snake, Moon – again squared, Snort, Randy, Basic, Fish, Bird, Tweed, Frenchy, Road, Potsie, Phunny, Puke, Size, Rosco, Grinch, JJ, Slither, Magic, Mase, Tag, Bait, Mikey, Yank, Geno, Maddog – at least squared, Archie, Butch, Sluggo, Spool, Sammy, Eagle, Okie, Arlo, Critter, Nubs, Dobber, Lester, Pirate, Brudog, Vegas, Dart, Glaze, Otter, Trash, Max, Shed, Ragu, Stiffy, Bone, Brick, Stubby, Rhino, Opus, Lechter, Bud, Burke, Wheatley and Coconut.

I shared the cockpit with some truly great Americans.

SKIP "ZOBES" ZOBEL





As with an Irish wake,
we now celebrate the Tomcat's life
as it enters its final months of service.

We can think back to the Desert Storm days,
when the F-14 was relegated to CAP missions and TARPS sorties
here and there while Intruders, Hornets and even Vikings
were happily dropping bombs on the bad guys.

Fast forward to Bosnia, Kosovo, OEF and OIF.
Suddenly the Tomcat was the Battle Group Commander's
platform of choice when ultimate strike accuracy was required –
in the days when a Hornet couldn't drop a PGM
unless it was being designated by a Tomcat.
You get a clearer vision of the metamorphosis of this great machine.
When you couple its new capability
with the fact that it is still one of the
most elegant and versatile aerodynamic machines ever designed,
there can be little doubt that the Tomcat
would be flying for years to come
if there were a credible air-to-air threat.

But all good things come to an end.
If I could go back and relive any part of my life,
it would most definitely be the time I spent in the F-14 community.
Since that end cannot be forestalled,
we can treasure both the experience and the contribution
the Tomcat has made to our Navy and our country.

PETE "CAPS" WILLIAMS





Golden days © RICHARD VANDERHEULEN / PLANETX.COM





The Tomcat is a legend,
not just in US Naval aviation but in the history of flight.
When folks ask if it was cool to fly the F-14, I always tell them
it was the most fun you could possibly have with your clothes on.

JOHN "BARSTOOL" BARSTOW

They say your first plane is always your first love.
Amen to that.
There will never be anything like the Tomcat.

JIM "MOUTH" McCALL

My final thoughts on the Turkey Beast are the secret that
all of us share.

The uninitiated non-believers think an airplane is
a collection of moving parts and miles of wiring.

We know better.

MARSHALL "WAR DOG" LEFAVOR





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End of an era © TOHTWOMEY / PLANEPX.COM

